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## Good Habits

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"Mr. —." Before I looked up from my grade book, I recognized the voice.

"Yes, Diana," I replied. Diana had been in my advisory the previous year as a freshman. She and I had built a strong bond through her struggles as a new student at South Valley Academy.

Diana's smile grew larger, she began to bounce up and down. "I passed all my classes for the first quarter!"

"That's outstanding Diana. I am so proud of you!" Diana had passed zero classes at the end of the first quarter a year ago at this time.

"I just wanted to say to you, that if it weren't for you..."

"Diana, you worked hard—"

"Mr.—no, I wouldn't be passing, I wouldn't have these habits if it weren't for you. I just want to thank you so much." Tears were welling up in Diana's eyes.

I felt proud not only for her success but also for the fact she could articulate that her improved habits led to her academic achievement.

This story is not from a movie or book. True, it was a dream that I had when I first decided to become a teacher. For many years, this ideal of teaching withered inside of me. But this dream became real. It happened to me last week.

South Valley Academy, where I teach, is a special place. It's a place that promotes stories like this one. I particularly appreciate my school because it took me almost a decade of teaching to find it.

I started teaching on the Navajo Nation in northwest New Mexico as a corps member with Teach for America, an organization that strives to end the achievement gap by placing recent college graduates in disadvantaged schools. I had no background in education except for an intense five-week summer training. During each of those 16-hour days, when I attempted to absorb a Masters degree worth of information, I left feeling that less would have been more.

I doubt anything could have adequately prepared me for the challenges of being a white privileged man teaching in a Native American, under-resourced community. The statistics were frightening: high unemployment; graduating classes a small fraction of those that began in ninth grade; physical, sexual and drug abuse at epidemic proportions. I was well-intentioned but had no clue as to the vast amount of resources this community would need so I could teach and students could learn.

My first year in the classroom was hell. My students needed a much more talented teacher than I, and I needed a lot more support than I was receiving. It was a school that had no explicitly stated guiding principles, but if it did have one collectively held belief, it might have well as been "Every person for himself." I did not know, much less trust, many of the other staff members at my school.

I left after two years to receive a "proper" education. I didn't know if I'd return to New Mexico, but I was committed to continue teaching in under-resourced communities and knew I needed a better education to be successful. I decided that Teachers College at Columbia University had the best Masters degree program for learning to teach high school English.

At Teachers College, I studied teaching pedagogy and theory at an evaluative level that wasn't possible while teaching full time. Even as I valued this opportunity, I started to identify the gaps between curricula as it was presented by the experts and my students' needs. I knew my students needed curricula that could be personalized

to adolescents that had yet to develop strong academic habits.

I returned to northwest New Mexico a more successful teacher. I taught eighth grade Language Arts at a public junior high school of 1,500 eighth and ninth graders. Through participatory action research, I learned to teach both skills and habits explicitly and in small steps. I taught each new group of students how to enter my classroom, how to begin “Do Now” work before the bell rang, and how to use a homework binder so they wouldn’t lose their work. Yet, a third of my students failed every semester due to attendance issues, lack of work completion, or the need for one-on-one help. My 120 student load did not permit the level of attention many of my students needed. At this school, struggling kids didn’t slip through the cracks, they poured out. This model of a large, traditional junior high wasn’t organized to promote the success to all students and staff at the school. Neither students nor teachers were empowered to change the institution to meet their needs.

When I moved to Albuquerque I was drawn to South Valley Academy (SVA) without fully realizing that my previous experiences had shaped what I was looking for in a school. I thought I liked SVA because it was a small school that had a tangible sense of community among staff and students. But after my first staff meeting in which the entire staff voted on several proposals to improve our learning community, I read the 10 Common Principles listed on a CES poster hanging on the wall and realized SVA was part of a larger movement. I felt validated that my experiences were articulated by an organization of like-minded schools.

At the end of the first quarter my first year, several of my 11 advisees were failing a few classes. Only Diana failed all six of them. She was turning in less than half of her work, didn’t understand the concepts, and was getting further and further behind everyday. She reminded me of my previous students as they had begun to slip away from school.

Because SVA believes in and provides structure for personalization, all students have an advisor that can give them the one-on-one attention they deserve. As an advisor, it was my job to quickly identify students in need of extra support and coordinate that support with other staff members and parents.

SVA also believes in mastery learning. We do not give students one grade such as a B. Instead, we break down evaluations into skills and habits to more clearly delineate a student’s strengths and challenges. Diana needed to work on her habits before her skills would improve. I coached her on ways to write every task in her agenda and then cross off each one as she completed it. I sat her down every day for weeks after school to help her focus on her homework until it was complete and high quality.

I was able to spend this time tutoring my advisee Diana even though I taught four English classes because I had 68 students. I was more effective in class, and after school my attention was shared by the few students that needed it. By the end of the semester, Diana was passing four of her six classes — but just barely. By the end of the year, her habits were much improved. She had become almost self-sufficient and failed only one class.

Diana’s expression of thanks was one of the most powerful moments I’ve experienced in education. It is very powerful to witness a student making a life-altering improvement. It was also a significant moment because I saw for the first time what the embodiment of the CES Common Principles could achieve. In my previous teaching experiences, I had learned so many lessons about what does not work in education: teaching in isolation to large numbers of students within a rigid structure that does not care for individual needs. SVA stands apart from these other experiences because it has structures that enable effective and relevant teaching and learning to take place. Diana thanked me for teaching her good academic habits. In turn, I thank my school for continuing to embrace and refine how we live the principles that transform our students’ learning experiences and, quite possibly, their lives.

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South Valley Academy (SVA) strives to prepare young people to become lifelong learners in a small school setting, based on high academic standards for all, individual appreciation for each student and teacher, a culture of trust, respect for the diverse traditions of New Mexico, and involvement of family and community. The school was founded in 1999.

Over 90 percent of SVA’s students are Hispanic, English Language Learners, and qualify for free or reduced lunch. The school utilizes personal learning plans, advisories, and service learning to help compliment the rigorous skills-based curriculum. Over 90 percent of SVA’s graduates attend college.

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experiences. Sean graduated from the University of California-Berkeley with a B.A. in English in 2001. He has three Masters degrees in education: Elementary Education from Western New Mexico University, Teaching of English from Columbia University-Teachers College and Educational Leadership from Western New Mexico University.

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