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Never Underestimate the Power of One

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Never underestimate the Power of One: one student, one parent, one administrator, one teacher or one team of teachers. The following is a story about the Power of One, one student who brought a loaded gun to school, one teacher who confiscated a book, one student, a reluctant reader, who urged the teacher to read the book and the journey they all took because of *Give a Boy a Gun* and the Power of One.

Starting the journey.....

“I just want to know why I am getting punished for this little matter when Sam brought a loaded gun to school and carried it around all day! What’s up with this?” That single statement was what alerted the teachers at West Millbrook Middle School that they had a big problem. A problem made all the larger because the student grapevine had not brought the gun-toting student to the attention to any adults. The student had showed the gun on the bus and then proceeded to carry it around all day hidden in the kangaroo pouch of his sweatshirt. What’s up with this, indeed?

Several days later an 8th grade language arts teacher noticed a student hiding a book inside his desk and taking every chance to read it while the lesson was going on. The teacher, Aimee Niebauer, confiscated the book. She was especially disturbed to see the title, *Give a Boy a Gun*, but was even more interested in discovering learning what was so engaging about this book that a reluctant reader would be voraciously reading. She read a few pages and then asked to borrow the book from the student.

Give a Boy a Gun (GBG) is a book about bullying. While it does contain some violence, it’s really a case study about a group of adolescents, their school, their teachers and their peer groups. The reader is invited into the daily lives of these students. The book does not pull any punches when it addresses the day-to-day interactions of students and peer groups. It points out how students, thought to be outside of the popular main stream, are further marginalized by hurtful comments and pranks. Teachers who fail to act against the bullies are seen to be as guilty as those who actually perpetrate the acts of bullying. Because they

failed to provide a safe haven, they enabled others to put students at risk.

Seeing the possibilities.....

To Aimee Niebauer this book was a powerful weapon whose use might counteract the rising level of bullying she had noticed in her middle schoolers. Of course, students didn't own the behavior as bullying, but instead called it "playing around." In addition to increased bullying, the school had had a rising number of discipline referrals, students appeared apathetic toward their school work and the demographics had changed in the school to include many more disenfranchised student groups.

Getting the buy-in.....

Aimee spoke with colleagues about the book, shared it with the administration and school counselors, used involved parents to give her feedback on the book, and brought the book to other members of her team with the suggestion that they consider teaching the book using a curriculum integration approach. After receiving solid support from her team, she suggested to the three other eighth grade teams that they, too, teach the book. Those teams also bought into the idea. The entire eighth grade team was on board.

Aimee didn't want to put the cart before the horse, but she knew that the only way to get county approval for the book was to show the in-depth lesson planning needed to teach the unit on bullying. In other words, the work would have to be front loaded with no guarantee that the teachers could actually teach the book. Undaunted, the teams met to plan the unit. Aimee leaned heavily on a gifted social studies teacher, Gina DeBose, who demonstrated for others how she integrated the big lessons of the book into her North Carolina/American history lessons. The twelve teachers took off with the draft lesson planning ideas and met again later to finalize the unit.

The county saw the soundness of the teachers' work and case for the book, and approved

its use. The PTA was less helpful. Gina took the case for the book before the PTA and she was told that the teams' need to purchase the book for the classes to read would have to take its chances when the PTA drew requests from a hat. After all, other projects needed funding. The "random drawing-hat approach" used to fund a key element of the curriculum came up dry. Fortunately, the principal was more forward thinking than the PTA and funded most of the purchase of the books. A teacher's grandfather, disgusted with the failure of the PTA to put its faith in the teachers' judgment, wrote a check for the remainder of the books.

Not ready for prime-time, yet.....

There was still more work to be done. The teachers hosted after school parent focus groups to get the reactions of the parents to the book. Most felt that this book was long overdue in the school curriculum and wished that it had been available when they were middle school students. Parents recounted horrifying stories about their own experiences with bullying. Initial negative reaction to the title of the book was overcome by its contents and the teachers received support for teaching the book from the parents. Other school personnel joined the team. Counselors and health teachers aligned their own curricula with the issues in the book. Health classes addressed suicide awareness and personal safety.

Teachers sent home permission slips to all parents so that parents could indicate their permission for their children to read the book. Included was a short synopsis of the book and options for other work for those children whose parents would not give their permission. In the end, all children read the book.

Building the foundation

While all teachers' lessons varied according to the make-up of the class, the underlying structure for the unit was the same. Teachers started by having the students characterize

the school climate. Survey results came up quickly using an on line “zoomerang” approach. Students defined what they thought bullying actually was and honestly addressed what they thought was going on in their school.

Teachers laid the groundwork for the unit by teaching lessons on conflict resolution. They borrowed from the “Don’t Laugh At Me” curriculum which helped students determine conflict escalators and come up with solutions for de-escalation.

Once the foundation was laid all teachers began teaching the novel in the context of their subject area. These lessons demonstrated the incredible value of using the curriculum integration approach to teaching. Students, who live their *actual* lives constantly integrating all kinds of facts and information, could see how this form of teaching and learning really did translate into real life application. They all became James Beane converts and used his tenets of curriculum integration as the model for their teaching.

- ◆ They enabled the students to address the Big Questions of bullying, peer groups, acceptance, and school climate. What better way to hook students and motivate them to be involved in the lesson?

- ◆ Teachers taught, assigned and assessed using the principles of multiple intelligences. Varied approaches in these areas enabled all to excel.

- ◆ The teachers used on-going formal and informal assessment.

- ◆ Finally, students demonstrated their knowledge through projects that they could share with one another, the school and parents. All had become experts on one aspect of bullying, getting along, etc.

Assessing the experience.....

For some this whole exercise might have been a missed opportunity, a story a teacher might have told about a “hidden book incident” in her language arts class, a “Can you believe

this” recounting of an undetected loaded gun that rode the bus and traveled around a school for a day. Instead, this is the story about the Power of One. It demonstrates the power of an individual to make a tremendous difference in the lives of a community, its parents, its school and teachers and students. It speaks to the professionalism and good judgment of all teachers who risk teaching what they know to be right and needed by their students.

This story represents the countless stories like it that happen every day in classrooms around the world. The Power of One helps us remember to listen to the students, to trust our professional judgment and to do what we know to be right. The need to address bullying was not picked up in the scores of an end of grade test, but rather in the day to day life of a school. Bullying was identified and addressed by teachers who saw the value in tailoring a unit to meet the needs of the students, all the while teaching items in the standard course of study or NOT.

In today’s world it takes courage to be a professional educator and to do the right thing for your students. There is not always a check off assessment to validate the teachers who teach what is really needed. This is a story about one teacher who cared about her school and students, one teacher who was vigilant and enlisted the support of others like her who believed in meeting the needs of their students. Their journey speaks to the Power of One to overcome challenges and find opportunities to make a difference.

We must never underestimate the Power of One, but rather embrace our own opportunities use that power to make a difference.

A word from the authors.....

This story leaves out the names of many of the teachers who made this unit a success and focuses on an 8th grade teacher who started and sustained the journey to teach *Give a Boy a Gun*. We are grateful to all who participated in the unit and to teachers everywhere who daily address the needs of their students.

We recommend to you the book by James Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1997) and the website that is based on Dr. Beane's work in curriculum integration, www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/ci The following websites address curriculum integration, projects using curriculum integration, and a program, Help Yourself, Yourself, that addresses the needs of early adolescents.

Curriculum integration projects and related websites:

www.ncsu.edu/chass/extgension/russia-nc6

www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/pskov2001

www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/russia

www.ncsu.edu/chass/extension/ghanatalk

www.ced.ncsu.edu/2/adventure/

www.ced.ncsu.edu/hyy

www.4.ncsu.edu/~cmbeal/eepals

Give a Boy a Gun is written by Todd Strasser and published by Simon and Schuster.