

# The Pygmalion Effect: Communicating High Expectations

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In 1968, two researchers conducted a fascinating study that proved the extent to which teacher expectations influence student performance. Positive expectations influence performance positively, and negative expectations influence performance negatively. In educational circles, this has been termed the Pygmalion Effect (<http://www.duq.edu/about/centers-and-institutes/center-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-and-learning/pygmalion>), or more colloquially, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What has always intrigued me about this study is specifically what the teachers did to communicate that they believed a certain set of students had "unusual potential for academic growth." The research isn't overly explicit about this, but it indicates that the teachers "may have paid closer attention to the students, and treated them differently in times of difficulty." This begs the following questions:

- Why can't teachers treat all of their students like this?
- How do we communicate to students whether we believe in them or not?

## Excellence, Celebration, and Success

Based on my experience coaching AVID (<http://avid.org/what-is-avid.ashx>) schools around the country, there are ways that I've seen teachers communicate to all of their students that they have high expectations. Here are a few practical tips that you can borrow from them:

### *Be Excellent in All Ways*

Everything speaks. We can't expect students to be excellent if we don't model that for them in every element of our classroom. I may not be able to infuse excellence into every classroom and hallway of my school or in every interaction that students have outside of school, so I must leverage and maximize every element that I do control. Too often, I walk into a classroom and know immediately if it's an honors class, just by how attractive the walls are or how organized the books on the shelves are. Every student

deserves a clean, organized classroom. Every student deserves a structured and engaging learning environment. Every student deserves lessons that are well thought-out and delivered every day. Excellence is a habit that is cultivated. When we model this every day, we communicate to students that excellence is the expectation.

### *Celebrate Small Victories*

Say, "I'm proud of you" -- and say it often. The day that I opened my college acceptance letter was the only time that I ever remember my dad saying, "I'm proud of you." It was so impactful and memorable for me that I tried to say that phrase to students every chance I got. Passed a test? "I'm proud of you." Got to class on time? "I'm proud of you." It's a low-cost investment with the potential for life-altering rewards. I love hearing teachers say, "Great job" or "You did it!" It's positive reinforcement at its finest.

### *Make Failure Unacceptable*

The single most impactful way that we can communicate our beliefs to students may be how we react when they fail (<http://avidcollegeready.org/college-career-readiness/2013/3/22/no-excuse-to-fail.html>) an assignment, test, or grading period. Rather than ignoring the situation or moving students to a different class, we must communicate this:

*My job as your teacher was for you to learn this material, so let's figure out how to make that happen. If you're not learning the way that I teach, maybe I need to teach the way that you learn. Is this a cognition issue? Then let's get you to tutoring. Is it a learning strategies issue? Then let's talk about other ways to study, learn, and organize your thinking. Is this a motivation issue? Then let's talk about the short- and long-term repercussions of failing.*

Failure cannot be the path of least resistance in our classes. Rather, we must do everything that we can to make failure unacceptable and difficult. When we accept students' failure, we give them permission to accept it as well. However, when we show that nothing they can do will ever make us give up on them, we give them permission to start believing in themselves.

### **Raise the Bar Right Now**

In AVID schools, we espouse a philosophy that encompasses the items above, called "Rigor with Support." It's the idea that we believe every student can and should be prepared for college and career readiness, and that we will keep the expectations high, but also offer the support to help students get there.

So here are my challenges to you:

- Look around your classroom or at your lesson plan for tomorrow. What is one component that you can make more excellent?
- Find one thing to celebrate tomorrow, and look one student directly in the eye and tell him or her, "I'm proud of you."
- Think of one student who has failed an assignment or grading period recently, make time to meet with him or her individually, and figure out a plan to not let it happen again.

I'd be very interested to hear how your results looked and felt. Please share them in the comments below.

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