

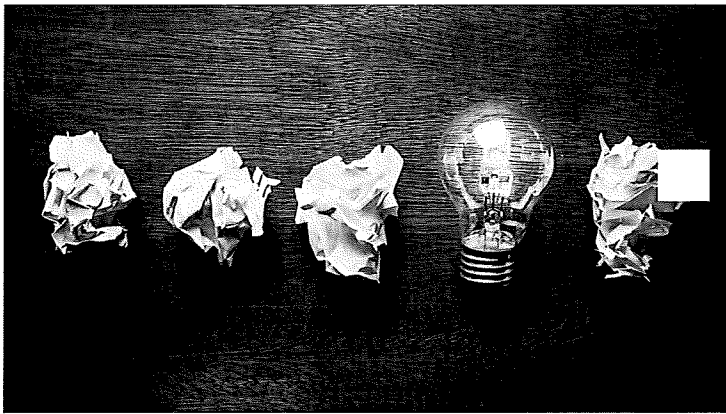
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

A Classroom Full of Risk Takers

State teachers of the year explain how they make students feel safe enough to take risks—and then push them to do so.

By Leticia Guzman Ingram (<http://www.edutopia.org/users/leticia-guzman-ingram>)

September 14, 2017



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No one learns without making mistakes. Quite the opposite—we learn when we make mistakes. But in the classroom, making mistakes and taking risks can be at best unrewarded, and at worst ridiculed and unnecessarily penalized.

I asked my 21-year-old son the other day what high school class had made him feel safe to make mistakes. He said that he never made mistakes. Really? He explained that he only did the work if he knew he was going to succeed. That made me think about my own teaching: Do I create a classroom where students will be risk takers?

I strongly believe that you have to fail in order to grow, and you need to do that through difficult situations. How rigorous are my classes? Do I create a safe space for everyone to speak freely? Are my students respectful to one another, and do they support each other to take risks and fail?

With so many questions, I decided to turn to a group of 2016 state teachers of the year and ask them what they do to encourage students to feel safe taking risks and pushing the boundaries of what they know or think they know.

Celebrate Perseverance

Jean Russell, an elementary school teacher from Indiana, said her class puts a marble in a jar when students persevere. That includes trying different strategies to read a new work, solve a math problem, rewrite a sentence, or work out a difference with a friend. The marbles mean that when each student sticks with learning, the whole class benefits. “When the jar gets full, we have a perseverance party!” Russell said.

Share Your Mistakes

Several teachers lead by example. Arizona’s Christine Porter Marsh admits her own mistakes and talks about them. “I’ll say, ‘You were right. I was wrong.’” She also tells her classes that it’s OK to be wrong during discussions: “I’d rather have you contribute and be wrong than not contribute.” Topher Kandic of Washington, DC, demystifies the role of the teacher as an all-knowing sage by reading new texts with students and predicting how stories will turn out—often getting it wrong, but showing students that it’s OK to make mistakes.

Allow Retakes

To encourage thinking and exploring ideas, Ernie Lee of Georgia says he allows retakes of assignments and tests. “The grade is important, but the main goal is for them to be able to think and to know the material.” And he makes sure that whether students agree or disagree with him, they back up their comments with well-thought-out ideas to support their answers.

Discover ‘the Power of Yet’

Teachers can model desired behaviors in all aspects of teaching, including how to handle a mistake and move forward, says Natalie DiFusco-Funk of Virginia. Most important, teachers can communicate how to learn from mistakes and do things differently next time. As a teacher, she says, “I use the phrase ‘the power of yet.’” It means—for her personally and for her students—that just because they can’t do something yet doesn’t mean they can’t do it.

Failure Fridays

That’s right. Failure Fridays. This idea comes from Diane McKee of Florida. Each Friday, McKee shows movie clips of famous people like J.K. Rowling, Michael Jordan, or Oprah Winfrey sharing stories about how they experienced failure before going on to succeed. It’s one of her students’ favorite activities.

These ideas remind us that we must be deliberate about creating environments that maximize learning for all students. As a member of the Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, I see similar ideas becoming a priority for schools across the country. The Commission's new case study, "**Putting It All Together (<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/putting-it-all-together/>)**" shows how important integrating social and emotional learning into school curriculum is to that goal of maximizing learning. One teacher cited in the report works to develop life skills—"definitely independence; definitely the ability to work collaboratively; definitely perseverance"—that are equally valuable in fostering risk taking.

As a new school year begins, I'm working to set a new tone in my classroom.

A few years ago, I started my class by demonstrating something I was bad at: hacky sack. The kids laughed when I started missing the hacky sack and they saw how bad I was. I brought one of the students that I knew was good to the front of the class and had him demonstrate. I asked him how he got so good. Was it easy at first? Could I become as good as he was? Would he help me? We then had a group discussion about how failure and practice can help us grow.

That's how I'll set the tone for this year. I want my students to believe risks are valuable. I want to have a class where risks are celebrated. I want my students to feel free to make mistakes in front of friends and peers and collaborate to figure out answers. I want them to try not just when they're sure they'll succeed—I want a class of risk takers.

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