

## Students Also Responsible for Learning

by John Richard Schrock

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There were 60 students in the classroom, seated in pairs at bench desks, quietly studying. And there was no teacher present! This was a middle school in Henan, China, and the students were unaware we had walked into the back of the classroom.

“Why are they so quiet?” I whispered.

“They are studying very hard,” was the reply.

“But there is no teacher present,” I continued.

“It is a study hall,” was the reply, but not really what I was asking about.

“Why is no one being disruptive?” I asked pointedly.

“Oh, that doesn’t happen. If a student is disruptive and doesn’t work hard, there is someone else waiting to take their place who will behave and who will work hard.” That finally answered my question.

My Chinese teacher colleagues could not imagine any student not taking every advantage of the limited opportunities to progress. And as an American teacher, I could not imagine any class of 60 students where at least a few would not take advantage of an opportunity to “goof off.”

When I describe the United States school system, China’s teacher trainers marvel at the American teacher’s right to decide what, when and how to teach, to select their own textbooks, and to write their own quizzes and tests. They envy the lack of student stress and the fact that our students’ fate does not ride on one high stakes test.

What surprises my China colleagues is that American students do not carry any of the responsibility for learning. In China, if a student fails to pass the leaving exams, the responsibility falls completely on the student. The teacher completes his or her job by teaching-to-the-test and if the student does not succeed when others have passed, it is completely the student’s fault.

In the United States, when a student does not succeed, it is the teacher’s fault. You can read this in national and state standards that proclaim science or math “for all” and load the burden for

achieving minimal competency on the teacher under the rubric of “accountability.”

The Kansas professional standards for teachers ignores any student responsibility and repeatedly puts the full burden for student success on teachers. Even student teacher evaluation forms are rigged to assess whether a teacher “motivates” students.

I always scratch this section out—a science teacher has a responsibility to be exciting and interesting; but whether the student is motivated to pursue this study or become a scientist is up to the student.

I would not chose to import any of the Chinese teach-to-the-test system (although it is being established here through the standardization movement). But we could use more student responsibility. When Fred studies hard and “gets it,” and Joe doesn’t study and fails, it is time to stop blaming the teacher. The best of physicians will lose patients and the best of teachers will lose students, in spite of everything they can do.

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