

**Reach them before you teach them**  
*Connecting to kids in crisis by creating classroom community*

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*c. 2009*

*For my sister Cheryl  
who taught me  
that I was a teacher*

*and for my kids in 503  
who taught me  
how to do it right*

## ***From one teacher to another...***

Second to being a parent, teaching is the hardest jobs there is. Of course, folks outside of education say we have it great with just ten months of work... What they don't realize is that we cram twelve months of work into those precious ten and then use the summer to catch up on what we didn't get to by June.

That said, this guide certainly isn't about making your job any harder. But it will offer you real world, practical strategies that you could use in your class today in order for you to work *smarter...*

This guide is also *not* about teaching curriculum. You're the expert in what you teach and you are well aware of what your kids are supposed to learn. But what it will show you is how to *reach* your kids – all of your kids – especially the ones who act as if they don't want to be reached. You know who I mean.

For 20 years I've worked with kids identified as "at risk", the last 17 of those in a large (1800 students, grades 9-12), comprehensive public high school just outside of Rochester, New York. It was here that I ran the Alternative Education Program, which later came to be called Crossroads. And it was here that I learned *how* to teach because my students taught me so well. They taught me how to listen and suspend judgment, how to respect their families and be a mentor, how to model what I taught and how to create classroom community. Most importantly, however, they taught me that I'd never be able to teach them until – first – I was able to reach them.

Today, I live in Portland and work with the Oregon Small Schools Initiative. As a school coach, I assist teachers and principals in developing the school and classroom communities conducive to connecting with kids to ensure learning for all.

It's because of these experiences that I'm sharing what I've learned (and am still learning) about reaching kids in crisis: those who've grown up in the context of poverty, who don't 'fit' within the complex social hierarchy that thrives within the traditional public school system, and who don't understand why they should even consider graduation because they say, "No one in my family finished school, why should I?"

It's for *these* kids that I want to help you work smarter. Because each one of them matters.

Thanks for all you're doing to make a difference,

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## Our moral imperative

School reform is all the rage – we're scrambling to prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to create life-long learners who will be able to adopt skills and knowledge not even imagined while utilizing project-based instruction to maximize transferable learning experiences. Pedagogy has become “transparent” as our professional development brims with protocols and norms to guide our newly-formed professional learning communities. School redesign efforts flourish as districts and education departments shape curriculum to align standards with state and federal mandates...

All this and we're still losing kids.

*Lots of kids.*

Folks outside of education see the drop out statistics flash across CNN, read the local newspapers berating our failing schools, shake their heads at bar graphs reflecting significantly lower earning potential for kids without post-secondary degrees. And those of us in education? We see kids disconnected from learning, struggling with adult levels of responsibility and leaving the classroom in droves – over 7,000 a day at last count.

That said, this guidebook is a step toward doing *something*. Now. And regardless if you're teaching in a small school, private charter or sprawling comprehensive, this book is about best practices in building equity in your classroom community. We all know the holy trifacta: Rigor, Relevance and Rapport. But to reach kids in crisis, teachers need to do more than connect with kids, we need to allow kids to connect with *us*. A true relationship is a two-way street and to make a difference in the lives of kids in crisis, identification is key. If all teachers started by connecting to their kids – *all* of their kids – discovering what makes them tick, uncovering what fears are holding them back while sharing their own passions and goals in order to reveal how alike we are...Well, you see where I'm going here.

The strategies, stories and practices you'll encounter are researched-based approaches steeped in learning theory. Arranged to follow a typical school-calendar year, you'll learn ways you can build that foundation of two-way rapport in order to know how to make the material relevant so the skills can be reinforced to ensure a rigorous learning experience.

Within each chapter, I offer stories and strategies as well as a place for you to reflect and plan approaches that will best fit *your* style, *your* students and *your* school/community. That's the catch here – there IS no “right way” to create community. There are far too many variables when dealing with people, but the practice of a meaningful and intentional establishment of trust, expectation and compassion will allow all students – especially those in crisis – to thrive.

Never stop learning.