

# Deliberate Optimism

Reclaiming the Joy in Education

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# Choosing to Become a Teacher Is a Telling Vote for Optimism

*Optimism is the foundation of all good teaching. Optimism in the face of daunting reality is downright heroic—and that, in fact, is what good teachers practice all day long while others denigrate their contributions to society.*

—Rafe Esquith (2014)

When we (the authors) write about optimism, we do not intend to imply that teachers should show up every day with perpetual grins pasted on their faces. Nor are we talking about educators doing cartwheels down the hall to face an angry parent in the office, or dancing gleefully into a required professional development meeting on blood-borne pathogens, or squealing with delight when given the task of disaggregating student data from the latest high-stakes test results. Just as with any job or profession, we all have duties that are less than pleasant. Our intent is to examine realistic, purposeful strategies teachers and school leaders can employ to restore their hope in a system they feel is rapidly heading off course.

When individuals decide to become teachers, they enter an unbreakable pact with the future. They promise to do the best they can with what they have and with what they know in order to mold successfully the next generation. As educators, we know that it is our obligation to grow, to learn, and to reflect on how to improve ourselves every year so that we leave the future of this world in the best, most capable, most educated hands imaginable. If we don't subscribe to this noble purpose, then what are we doing in education?

*An outstanding principal we know walks into the school cafeteria every day and shouts, “Whose school is this?” The students and teachers respond loudly, “Our school!” Building optimism means believing in our philosophy, “Our School, Our Team, Our Kids!”*

## FIVE PRINCIPLES OF DELIBERATE OPTIMISM FOR EDUCATORS

We realize that the challenges of teaching today are greater than they have ever been before. Schools have become a political minefield of mandated policies and procedures that censure original thinking and creative innovation. Teachers are expected to address standards-based instruction (SBI), Common Core Curriculum (CCC), response to intervention (RTI), end-of-course assessment (EOC), positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS), and problem-based learning (PBL) in their classrooms. We are asked to participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) for part of our professional development activities (PDs). We must learn to separate student data gleaned from standardized tests, design plans for differentiated instruction (D.I.), and focus on the multiple intelligences (M.I.) of each child. In our classrooms, we now have students on medication, students who *need* to be on medication, students who don't speak our language, students who sleep in cars at night, students who don't get to be kids when they go home from school, and students who would rather be anywhere else than at school. We have kids who endure more heartache in a month than many of us will have to confront in a lifetime. And sometimes, we also teach kids who will never have to work a day in their lives and are already acting like it.

The sheer number of problems in teaching may sometimes seem insurmountable. Rather than being overwhelmed by circumstances, though, we think there are some concrete practical steps that will help teachers remain hopeful no matter what the adversity. Influenced by the works of some of the world's greatest optimists, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Martin Seligman, Stephen Covey, and others, we developed the Five Principles for Deliberate Optimism for educators. We use them throughout this book to guide the discussion about how teachers, administrators, and other staff can intentionally and effectively become realistic optimists.

### 1. BEFORE ACTING OR *REACTING*, GATHER AS MUCH INFORMATION FROM AS MANY VARIED SOURCES AS POSSIBLE.

Perhaps because of the overscheduled, crazy busy lives most of us educators lead, we sometimes rely on others to articulate critical issues impacting our lives. We listen to our preferred news outlet with a naïve belief that it is imparting unbiased facts to us rather than trying to create or spin a story to increase ratings. We receive information about the latest legislative mandate filtered through



## Five Principles of Deliberate Optimism

1. Before acting or *reacting*, **gather as much information** from as many varied sources as possible.
2. **Determine what is beyond your control** and strategize how to minimize its impact on your life.
3. **Establish what you can control** and seek tools and strategies to help you maximize your power.
4. Actively **do something positive** toward your goal.
5. **Take ownership** of your plan and acknowledge responsibility for your choices. ■

second-, third-, and fourth-party sources with their own agendas rather than reading the actual bill or proposal.

We have all been there. Someone returns from a district workshop with the news, “Get ready folks because *They* are completely doing away with cooperative learning! A lady in my group told me that her cousin’s daughter, who is a teacher, said her principal mentioned that he heard it from a reliable source. *They* are going to prohibit the use of cooperative learning in all Common Core disciplines. It’s true! From now on, we won’t be allowed to let students work in groups. Can you believe that? Oh my gosh, I don’t know what *They* are thinking! I cannot give up my groups. That’s the only way I have ever taught. *Those people* are crazy. Most of them haven’t been in a classroom in 30 years, and now *They* want to tell *Us* how to teach? I don’t think so. That’s the last straw for me. I’m going to turn in my resignation, buy a pair of skates, and go be a carhop for Sonic.” And the word spreads like head lice. By the end of the day, everyone in your school is preoccupied with the new mandate (which of course, turns out to be completely untrue).

Throughout the book, we talk more about how to avoid this kind of negativism and provide ideas for better choices than just blindly following along or chiming in when problems occur. For now we want to highlight the point that each of us needs to make every effort to collect accurate information before we react to or act on hearsay.

We’re not saying that schools, districts, states, and the federal Department of Education give every issue impartial treatment or that the decisions they make are always fair or even sensible. But we know from experience that it is vital for each of

us involved to know as much as possible about impending issues. We need to be aware, realistic, and as informed as possible.

***Realistic Awareness.*** Before we buy into or begin reacting to what is being disseminated as *the truth*, it is our responsibility to ask ourselves some guiding questions:

1. Who exactly is “*They*?” Are we talking about a person, a committee, a voting body, or some other entity? It’s important to know exactly who is responsible for the alleged decision.
2. Have I done my own research/fact checking on the current education issue or topic?
3. Have I sought out and listened to at least two sides of the issue or topic?
4. Have I relied on the words of others to help form my opinion? If so, have I considered their possible biases and credibility?
5. Have I tried to separate the facts from my preconceptions about those who made the decision (including attributing motives based on my assumptions)?
6. Was there an opportunity for me or for other affected parties to voice our opinions about the matter before a decision was made?
7. Are we as a staff waiting to react, or are we looking to begin a proactive approach to the problem?
8. Have we looked closely at the data used to support the new mandate?
9. Have we made an effort to contact similar schools or districts that have already implemented this program?
10. Have we as a staff dissected the full potential impact (pros and cons) on ourselves, our school, our community, and most importantly, our students?

Reviewing and reflecting on these questions might take time, but in the long run, the process will encourage helpful deliberations and perhaps influence those around us to think carefully before drawing conclusions.

## **2. DETERMINE WHAT IS BEYOND YOUR CONTROL AND STRATEGIZE HOW TO MINIMIZE ITS IMPACT ON YOUR LIFE.**

Nan Henderson (2013) correctly maintains, “Educators cannot eradicate poverty, remove neighborhood gangs, stop cultural violence, heal parental addictions, or prevent the myriad of other types of stress, risk, and trauma many students face daily” (p. 22). Likewise, we cannot as individuals stop widespread abuse, neglect, lack of parental support, debilitating health and learning disorders, or any manner

of large scale cases of social injustice. We cannot control which students come to our schools and which ones leave. We do not get to decide how school or district resources are allocated. We don't even have the final say in what grade, discipline, or even what curriculum we will teach.

**Job Placement.** Of course, part of our job placement is determined by our degree(s) earned, our area(s) of certification, and perhaps even our experience in a particular area. Schools have to provide documentation to the state that we are qualified (and now “highly qualified” under the No Child Left Behind Act) for the job assignment we have. In emergencies, a teacher can teach out of field, but for the most part, certain certifications are required to teach in specific areas. We usually warn teacher candidates to be careful about the certifications they earn. If you have a certification to teach high school humanities, and somewhere along the way you also acquired a certification in PreK–K instruction, your district can compel you to teach a kindergarten class (even if you'd rather have a root canal sans painkillers than teach anyone below ninth grade). Tenure normally stipulates that you will have a job but not which job you will have. In some districts, teacher unions have negotiated a bit more individual power in job selection, but for the most part, when you are hired by a district, you have no legal right to say which school you prefer or what you will teach.

**Curriculum.** Sometimes individual teachers are misinformed about who has the right to dictate curriculum. It is the constitutional right of the states to decide what they want to be taught in their schools. Sometimes states allow individual districts to make decisions within the state framework, but it is basically the state's responsibility to oversee curriculum. Recently the federal government has interjected itself into curriculum decisions by tying monetary rewards and compensation to its desired curriculum requirements, but states and districts have the right to refuse the money and choose their own curriculums. For example, the CCC is strongly supported by the federal government, but as of this writing, Texas, Nebraska, Virginia, and Alaska have opted to write their own state curriculums. The point is that it is not up to teachers to decide what subject matter they are going to teach in their classroom. Standards and essential ideas are determined beyond the individual teacher's level; consequently, time spent wailing over curriculum choices to people who are not decision makers is wasted. Sometimes, there are long-term solutions in which a teacher can become involved (write letters, volunteer to serve on committees, talk to decision makers), but for the most part, like job placement, the decision is not ours to make.

It is our contention that while we support the states' right to determine curriculum and establish standards, we wholeheartedly support the individual teacher's right to determine how and when we teach the mandated curriculum. We talk more about that in Chapter 6. The upshot is that constantly wringing our hands over things we cannot change is a waste of time and one sure way to lose optimism. There are many things we can control, and those are the areas in which we need to