

## TEACHER LEADERSHIP: STRIVING TO TAKE THE RIGHT ACTION

*“Am I living it right?” — John Mayer, “Why Georgia”*

One of my favorite questions on various listservs I have participated in is, “What would you do if you knew you could not fail?” The question implies that the risk — and thus, the fear — is removed from the situation.

Since I moved to California, the question has changed for me. The new question is, “What would you do if you took the right action? Why aren’t you?”

What if, in our classrooms, teachers’ lounges, district meetings and communities, we always did the right thing rather than the convenient, easy, or least frightening thing?

How would your classroom change if every action you took was based on doing what was right?

Let me be clear that I have far from mastered this simple but difficult concept.

When I think about my last school year and my school career, I see so many instances where I chose the easy or least scary path over what was right. I kept my mouth shut and my

opinions to myself because I was afraid of what “they” might think of me. I worried that speaking up would result in isolation and criticism.

It is important to note that the staff in no way did or said anything to give me that impression. As human beings, we tend to create illusions born out of our own fears and insecurities. My illusions were created out of my tendency to believe I am not smart enough and my fears of not belonging. Perhaps the staff would have reacted well, perhaps not, but because I did not speak up, I do not know. I never gave them a chance.

Right actions can be powerful. I have one instance I

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would like to share with you.

We are a public charter school. Charter schools tend to attract kids on extreme ends of the spectrum. We have a large number of gifted kids and a large number of special education and behavior-challenged kids.

Last fall, the staff started to talk about the larger number of behavior problems and special education students we were receiving. Talk turned toward developing a screening and application process to keep “those” kids out of our school.

I was crushed. I spent the first decade of my teaching career working with classrooms full of challenging students. I know what is possible when teachers commit to these students’ success. I’d like to say I

spoke up right away, but I kept silent out of fear. However, my passion for teaching struggling and at-risk youth refused to let me stay silent. I went to a staff member who was more experienced and whom I trusted and told her how I felt. She told me I had to tell the staff what I was thinking.

I brought it up at the next staff meeting. Explaining my concern about creating a policy of exclusion caused the staff to stop and think. We took a big step back from the policy that was going to be crafted.

The point is not that I stood up for kids or that the staff changed what it was going to do. I think what I did would have been as important if they had completely rejected what I said. What is important is standing up so there is the opportunity for the right thing to happen.

As it is, I learned a lot about my colleagues. If they had responded differently, I would have known it was time to find another school. I know now that, although we may have very different views and experiences, my fellow teachers are learning and are open to change. I know I am, for now, in the right place.

How do you start doing what you know is right? You just do it. You become aware of your choices and why you make them. Start small. Start with the way you respond to Johnny, who has come to your classroom for the 40th time without a pencil, or the way you sometimes pretend not to know what you know to keep the peace or avoid confrontation. And don’t beat yourself up when you don’t succeed. You are, after all, human. ■

This diary entry was first published by Teacher Leaders Network, a program of the Center for Teaching Quality. Browse more diaries at [www.teacherleaders.org/diaries.html](http://www.teacherleaders.org/diaries.html).



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