



Spurgeon Intermediate School

Home of the Cougars since 1974

Final Cougar Cable: 5/27/18

The Less Visible Fruits of our Labor

For the past two Cables I have written about the less visible work that is done in our schools by teachers and staff. This week I draw our attention to the less visible fruits of our labor. This is something that I was reminded of in the most wonderful way when a student with whom I worked years ago reached out to me last week. Before I discuss that let me set the stage a bit.

In our work there are many things for which we are held accountable. We - teachers, administrators, and staff - are held accountable for test scores (both local and high stakes state test scores), grades, the number of our English Learners who reclassify, and suspension rates. Most of these things land in our public accountability window, which here in California is currently the state Dashboard (public accountability has gone through many iterations but that is for a different article). Here in SAUSD we all work to move the needle toward greater success in our schools. This is important work to do, as its results are how some segments of the public measure our schools. I say "some segments" intentionally here.

For teachers, administrators and staff there are other measures of our personal successes that in some ways are more meaningful (though ideally these are aligned to the public measures). I was reminded of this last week when I received an email from Angie (last name withheld to protect her privacy). Angie's email was four short paragraphs long but it brought tears to my eyes. Before I share a portion of what she wrote let me say this.

This coming week we will have our Promotion Ceremony. We will be sending nearly 300 promoting 8th graders off to high school. We have engaged in three years of work getting them ready for the academic rigors of high school and beyond. Equally importantly we have worked to help these young people, at an admittedly tough time in their lives developmentally, to develop the social and emotional skills to succeed. This is the work that happens through relationships. These relationships start with remembering our students' names and tidbits about them. Taking this a step further, relationships with our students are enhanced by meeting their parents and remembering their names (this shows our students how much we care about them). Paying attention to them in the hallways and at lunch, not just in the classrooms where they perceive us to have all of the power. As administrators and staff, relationships with our students are enhanced when we invite them into our offices for good things, not just when they need redirection for bad choices. I've shared before that, for me, the relationships with our students and parents start each day at the gate as I greet students and parents with a wave and a handshake (sharing the same with staff that come in that way too). It is the relationships that we establish with our students that often bear the greatest life fruit. Though this fruit most often ripens well out of our sight.

Every teacher has a file of evidence of the fruit that their relationship work with students bears (remember, every adult on our campus is a teacher). My file includes notes that go



Spurgeon Intermediate School

Home of the Cougars since 1974

back to my first years in the classroom. Today, I share portions of Angie's note as there are broader lessons for us all here:

My name is Angie, I was a former student [who worked with you]. You were my assistant principal. I hope you remember me. My sister is Nayeli, we would always be in your office for ditching and just getting in trouble. You were always so nice to both my sister and I.

Well, I would just like to say thank you. I graduated high school, went to Fullerton Community College, where I graduated with high honors, and currently I'm at UCLA working on my sociology degree. I hope to go to graduate school. I'm applying this Fall.

I wanted to reach out because I know that as a female with both parents being undocumented and being low income, I didn't receive much encouragement to seek a higher education. Today, in lecture we went over our high school experiences, and I remember that many teachers and faculty weren't as encouraging as you. I wanted to say Thank you.

I hope you still have the same passion for education and believe in all your students.

Did you notice the successes that Angie wrote of? Not just her incredible academic successes (though those are certainly laudable). The bigger success is the awareness of the importance and value of kindness and persistence. Of course I remember Angie and her sister Nayeli. Both struggled in school for a variety of reasons. I worked with Angie, Nayeli and their parents (mostly their mother as I recall). Unlike a farmer, who plows the field, plants the seeds and sows the harvest, much of the work that we do is more analogous to Johnny Appleseed. We travel the education path planting seeds of encouragement, hope, caring and passion among our students but by the time those seeds bear fruit the trees (being the students) are long since out of our view and we are already planting new seeds. That is a good bit of our work. Many in the educational accountability field spend their energy purely on the numbers. These matter and they are a very real part of our work. Equally important is the work goes into the relationships with the students that cross our paths. Though we only rarely see the results of that work, it matters greatly (arguably more than the other work as students won't really focus on learning until they know how much we care about them).

Here is my reply to Angie. I publish it here in the hope that the sentiments expressed reach many other current and former students. It is our collective privilege to know and work with you:

Angie, Thank you for your email. I read it this morning and it brought tears of joy to me.

Of course I remember you and your sister Nayeli. I am so glad to hear about your success stories. I am confident that you will achieve amazing things as you continue on your life path.



Spurgeon Intermediate School

Home of the Cougars since 1974

I am glad that I was one voice that you found helpful and motivating. In the end, it is you who did the work and overcame countless obstacles on your path. It is your strength, will and drive that have positioned you where you are today. We all need others to encourage us and this is the work that I am fortunate to do every day.

So, you ask if I still have the passion for education and belief in students that I had when your and my paths crossed. Absolutely I do! In fact, I enjoy heart moments each day continuing to motivate young people in my school. That said, your words and recognition carry more weight than you can know. Principals, teachers and school staff all work hard to make a difference in our young people's lives. We throw out our line (fishing analogy here) and engage our best energy with the eternal hope that our work is making a difference in the lives of the young people with whom we work and are lucky enough to know. Only every now and again do we get such affirmation as your words provided that our work is effective. So, thank you for taking the time to reach back to me to share your experience during our time together and your current successes.

I truly continue to wish only the best for you and Nayeli. You deserve it 😊

As we head into promotion. I say to all of our students and families. "I truly continue to wish only the best for all of you. You deserve it. Thank you for a wonderful year!

This is my last Spurgeon Cougar Cable. Starting in August I will be writing, Lathrop Letters.

Stuart Caldwell