

Teachable Moments: Persistence

Thomas Edison had 10,000 failed attempts before he made a successful light bulb - this is an example of persistence.



The key character trait of persistence has been identified, through research, as one of those traits that enable students to be college and workplace ready after grades K-12.

What is Persistence? According to the Oxford dictionary, Persistence is defined as “firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition”. Persistent students exhibit sustained effort in the face of challenges and have an attitude of “stick-to-it-ness”, even when the task at hand feels daunting.

In this newsletter, we would like to help educators cultivate this characteristic with their students. The ACT governing body performed critical research in 2008 to understand what character traits were needed to help 8th grade students embark on a pathway that makes them ready for college and the workplace. One such characteristic was the characteristic of persistence or “sustained effort”. (The Forgotten Middle; Ensuring that all students are on target for college and career readiness before High School, p.26 © 2008).

There are 2 ways to help foster persistence within your students: (1) Telling stories of people who persevered in the face of challenges. (2) Rewarding persistent behavior in your students.

Telling Stories

Telling stories of people who persisted in the face of failure is a great way to inspire your students to be persistent. Babe Ruth scored 714 home runs but he also held the record for the most strikeouts: 1330. Thomas Edison had 10,000 failed attempts to create the light bulb before he found a way that worked. And do you know why one of the world’s most famous cleaning solutions is called 409? You guessed it. It was only on the 409th batch that two Detroit scientists found a grease-cutting solution that they were satisfied with. And finally, for a more modern day example, you can talk about how Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina Supreme Justice, despite having diabetes, studied hard, went to Princeton on a full ride scholarship, and now sits on the highest legal court in the country (and arguably the world - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonia_Sotomayor). We at Education4Equity are always looking for stories to inspire both women and those of historically challenged socio-economic backgrounds – as was the case with Sonia Sotomayor. To inspire those of the African American background, Dr. Ben Carson is a great example of someone who persisted at reading books until he became a neurosurgeon.

Rewarding Persistent Behavior

Another way to build persistence into your students’ character is to recognize and reward all behavior among your students that shows persistence. When you notice persistence in a student, you can say: “You really persisted to solve that problem! I am so pleased to see you hang in there until you were satisfied with your solution!” If you notice a particularly impactful example of persistent behavior, you may recognize it during a weekly “compliments” time. (The author of the Education4Equity course entitled “Habits of Mind for Academic Success & Beyond” practices this as the last item on Fridays’ agenda).