



How to Become a Successful Educator: Educators from Across the Country Share Their Thoughts

What makes a successful educator? We asked educators across the country this very question so that we could pass on their advice to you. Here are some of the many responses we received: Ryan Van Cleave shared his thoughts about his successful teaching career:

"I've been teaching for nearly twenty years at such places as Florida State University, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, University of Wisconsin-Madison, George Washington University, Eckerd College, Clemson University, and now the Ringling College of Art + Design. I'm writing to you because my student evals suggest I'm doing something right.

I build flexibility into every day's plan, so when the discussion winds its way into something the students find energy in, I don't have to skimp on that part of the discussion to 'stay on task.' It gives every class meeting an organic, student-driven feel that I know they appreciate. It also keeps it from being standard lecture mode."

Elaine Sigal, Chief Education Officer at www.mindlaunch.com, who has been teaching for 40 years, shared her thoughts with us on what makes her a successful educator:

"I knew when I was 4 that I wanted to be a teacher and there was not a soul on earth who could have changed my mind. I have been at this for 40 years. Was I (am I still) a good teacher - nope. At the risk of being arrogant, I am a great teacher. My reasons:

- I have a license to teach in two states. I have been trained to teach others.
- I have a passion for my subjects: English, writing, speech, and theater.
- I love to see that "light bulb" go on in my students' eyes.
- I have an incredible amount of energy. I am always "on."
- I constantly ask for feedback to better myself in my vocation
- I continued on in my education and earned a Master's Degree.
- I recognize my strengths AND my weaknesses. After starting out as a potential elementary school



teacher, I realized that my forte was older students. I don't teach students under middle school age.

- I am constantly researching and keeping abreast of what is happening in my field.
- I know how to listen.
- I know how to alter lesson plans at the drop of a hat.
- I know how to teach.
- I get excited thinking up new lessons.
- I am creative.
- I try to get into the heads of the students to tailor my plans to them.

- Even in a group class, I teach to the individual - all of them.

No, not everyone can teach. It takes a special person to have an audience every day and never know how that audience will respond on any given day. One must love to be a showman, to be a professional, to be a mentor, and to be a lifelong learner. Teachers who stop learning once they walk into the classroom have doomed themselves to failure."

Another successful educator, Mike Arman, FAA Certified Advanced Ground School Instructor, has taught about 4,000 student pilots over the past 11 years. He shared 6 tips about how he teaches these students effectively:

1. Pay attention to the students in the class. You can tell when they are engaged, when they are zoned out, and when they are having the "aha!" experience, which is very real.
2. Conduct the lesson as a conversation; don't just drone on like a recording. If you involve the students in a conversation, you'll quickly know who gets it and who doesn't. (This only works in small classes.)
3. Explain complicated concepts in small steps, using simple words. Yes, it can be done.
4. Respect your students - you may be the expert in YOUR field, but many of them are experts



in THEIR fields.

5. Know your material forward, backward and inside out. They'll sense if you're floundering and your credibility is gone. If someone asks you something you really don't know (and it happens), say "I don't know". You're being honest, and they respect you for that. The other half of that is "but I'll find out" and then do so.
6. Don't ever BS - it will be obvious, no matter how good you think you are at it."

We also heard from Kathryn Starke, an Elementary School Literacy Specialist and former classroom teacher, who shared her thoughts about success in teaching:

"I am an elementary school literacy specialist (former classroom teacher), and I have taught in Title I/inner city public schools in Richmond, Virginia for eleven years. I have been "playing school," however, since I was four-years-old, and I continue to grow every day as an educator. I have taught first, second, and third grade, and currently serve as the K-5 reading specialist. My master's degree in Literacy and Culture has really enabled me to focus on my expertise, teaching reading to all children. I believe that the strengths, weaknesses, and differences of all of my students each year help me become a more successful educator. As teachers, we have to understand our students and develop engaging lessons that meet their learning needs.

I have found in public education, especially in lower income schools where I have taught, there is often a lack of support and motivation among students and teachers. I have taken my experience, expertise, and passion in education to develop a global educational company that provides workshops, consulting, literacy nights, and events to get children, parents, and teachers excited about education! To be a successful teacher, you have to love what you do and continue to learn more and better yourself since you are working with our future. I want all teachers to feel this way, so I always look forward to helping fellow educators become successful in their position as well."

Elaine Comeau, an elementary school teacher and mother of three, shared what makes her a successful teacher:

"I have been an elementary school teacher for about 14 years. The bottom line that I try to communicate to new teachers and student teachers is something that I have learned that is most impactful on students, and that is children do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. Care about your students, know who each of them is, where they are coming from, etc. When you understand your students and know where they are coming from, you can know how



to effectively teach them to love learning and succeed in their lives. Teachers are definitely not in it for the money, but we should definitely be in it because we want to help kids learn and succeed.

Also, I believe that it is very important to teach children respect and specifically self-respect. When they learn how important it is to respect themselves, they will take care of themselves, their studies, their belongings, their classroom, etc. When they realize how important self-respect is, they will try harder in school, and they will understand how awful it is to be disrespectful to someone else. I believe that a teacher can help make kind decent people."

Marianne Douglas, author of two books for educators, shared her basic philosophy about what makes someone a successful educator:

"Here is my basic philosophy:

- Create a positive atmosphere. Research has proven over and over that people thrive in a positive climate. My positive classroom changed the whole school
- Treat kids with respect, not like they're less than you
- Notice them frequently. We all want to be seen, to know we matter.
- Don't put them on the spot or embarrass them
- The tougher they are, the nicer you are.
- Make learning fun. When did we decide school shouldn't be fun?
- Honor their learning styles. Have them take a survey to learn their best style. It empowers them and shows them they're not defective, just different.
- Encourage diversity with team building activities
- Be a role model of the behavior you want from them
- Expect the best from them from day one and they will rise to the occasion
- Make teaching relevant



- Challenge them and inspire them

This is what worked for me. I've received numerous awards for my teaching and my program. What's more important than the awards, are the hundreds of teens who as of last Friday are thanking me for changing their lives and giving them the tools to be successful...and happy."

Judi Lirman, M.A., a licensed Marriage, Family and Child Therapist and former middle school teacher, shared her experience with education:

"I taught middle school-8th grade English and a little speech and debate for thirteen years. I loved it. I became licensed as a psychotherapist in 1983, seeing clients since then in my private practice in Tarzana, CA in the San Fernando Valley.

I have always been connected with children, parents, and schools. For a number of years, after I was licensed, I went into schools as a behavior interventionist and supervisor for children who have IEPs and interacted heavily with the child, parents, and staff. For a number of years been a psychotherapist at a charter school. I am there one day a week working with the children and the classrooms. I have done seminars for the teachers, run a group for the parents, attended and written reports for the IEPs, etc.

As a teacher, I have found the things that set exceptional teachers apart are their love of learning and respect and support of students as a group and as individuals. To teach well, you must be willing to do the work necessary. Many of my English teacher colleagues assigned paragraphs and papers to their students. Even though, as the department chair I encouraged them to, few of them did more than check off that the work that had been turned in. The students' time and words are important. They cannot learn until they have it explained how to improve in a manner they understand. Meeting a child where they are and moving them forward is what teaching is about."

Dr. Joyce Mikal-Flynn, an associate professor at Sacramento State University School of Nursing, shared a set of points with us about what makes a good educator:

Preparedness

- Expertise of subject.

The basics: Having things set, organized, and giving little doubt of what the students can and will expect is key. The syllabus must be organized and clear. It is discussed at the first class as are the expectations for the students and what they can expect from you. These expectations include course work, feedback and communication timing (turnaround time for emails).



You must be an expert or keep up on all new/pertinent information having to with the subject matter.

Engagement

- Collaborative learning

I already know what I know---I already have several degrees thus this is not about me or my learning. The clear, expressed focus is on what the student wants/needs. To that end, you must encourage them to be a part of their learning. If I do not get their input into what they are in the course for, it is futile. It also makes the learning so much for fun for both professor and student.

Stop using power points

- Go directly to students

People rely too much on them. This takes away the engagement. These are used when people do not know what they are doing. Power points should just be a few words or pic to assist in making a point.

Love what you teach

- Making learning FUN

When children start talking, one of the first thing things they say is, "why?". So children, people are naturally inquisitive. When we teach children there is a joy in learning---it is fun. What happened? What have we done to them in school? This has to be re-ignited. That is my job. To make learning fun, something they want to come to class for.

Vannessa Wade, who teaches adult ESL students in Houston, Texas, shared her thoughts on education:

"What makes me a great educator is my ability to listen and observe the needs of my adult ESL students. Being great is not about awards, but the impact you make on the people involved. It is learning how to adjust your style to serve the needs of others. I work with adults and while you may feel everything is great - they offer feedback on what does and does not work. You learn to listen more than speak and you learn to channel your passion into something that builds the lives of others."

As you can see by these varied responses, there are a lot of differing opinions about how to become a successful educator. I would suggest that a combination of the above advice would be best, and that you should work on the areas that you need to improve on most when striving to become a better educator.