



Diana Callope receives the 2015 Teacher of the Year Award from Sen. Herb Kohl and State Superintendent Tony Evers.

Connections & Collaboration

These constants in a sea of education trends help create an environment in which students care to learn

Diana Callope

I entered the field of education in 1992, and during my 23-year career, I have participated in a multitude of curricular and technological changes.

In addition to teaching sixth, then seventh, and finally eighth grade, my love for teaching math has been accompanied in the past with teaching language arts and social studies. For at least the first five years, my classrooms were equipped with chalk boards before marker boards became the norm. And to speak of technology now, well, that will change before this article is even published. My first classroom included one computer solely used for playing “The Oregon Trail” on rainy days at recess. Now many

districts have 1:1 technology!

So, how is it that students continue to grow and succeed amidst a sea of change in education? For me, the key is in the connections made with students each year.

■ All Students Can Learn

Shifts in curriculum standards, best practice and gains in technology will continue to be made, but the constant in my educational philosophy has been that, by connecting with students and becoming a significant, motivating adult in their lives, students in my classroom can learn anything.

I strive to create a community environment founded on respect and the premise that, although we may not all have the same academic

abilities, interests, and strengths, we all have the potential to learn. It is my belief that students learn best from those who share a genuine interest in their learning and in the ultimate outcome of their success. Creating a quality learning environment is about much more than knowing and dispensing the content; it’s about creating an environment in which students care to learn.

■ Community Education

And so, each year begins with a genuine effort to know my students and to let my students know me. I relate many personal stories and analogies to our studies in mathematics and even share successes and struggles I had as a student. Essen-

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tially, I become their cheerleader as we build a community within the classroom. High expectations are set for each student, but they also know that I will make every effort to help them succeed — and I call upon their peers for reinforcement.

Building successful connections between students begins with communication. Students in my classroom are provided with a variety of opportunities for daily collaboration. Whether they are debating solutions to a problem from last night's assignment, working with partners to solve a new problem or writing lyrics to perform original math songs, students are building connections not only with me, but with each other.

This allows gifted and talented students to challenge each other

through discovery and discussion, English language learners to gain from language immersion while collaborating with English speaking partners in math, and students with learning disabilities to have opportunities to talk about strategies with peers as coaches.

■ **Creating Learning Coaches**

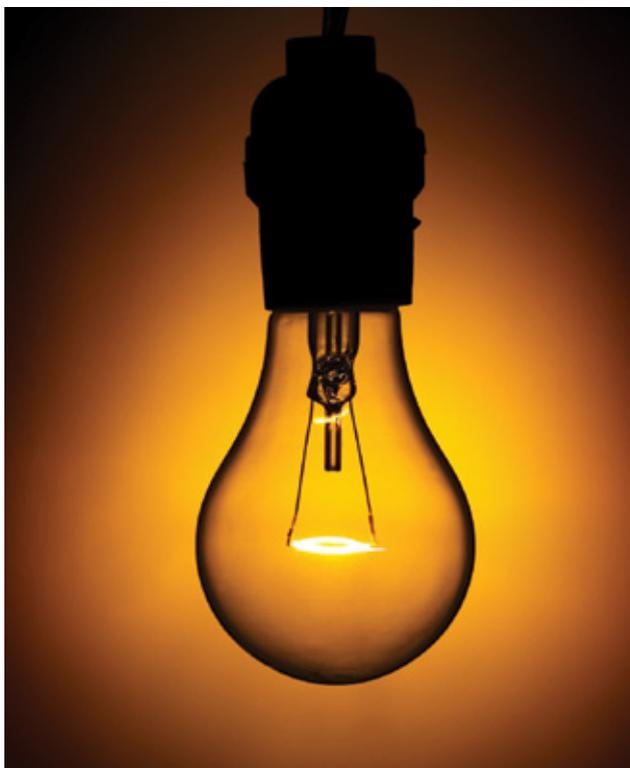
In addition to creating a collaborative classroom environment, my door is always open for extra assistance. Students often arrive early in the morning with partners from class. But even here, once I answer a few questions, they become coaches for others. Students understand they are active participants in their learning and they know I am available on the sidelines to guide, motivate and cheer

them on. They know it truly matters to me that they succeed.

I don't know what education changes will come in the next 10 years, but I am certain that change is coming. Will I write new curriculum for new or adjusted standards? It seems likely. Will my Promethean Board be replaced with some new-and-improved technology for teachers? I would guess, yes.

But regardless of whatever new waves of change arrive at my classroom door, it is certain that each year I will continue to make connections with my students and encourage collaboration within my walls to create the best possible environment for their success. ■

Diana Callope, an eighth grade teacher at Whitewater Middle School, is the 2015 Wisconsin Teacher of the Year.



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