

*On Aug. 16, we welcomed our students to start the new school year a bit differently. Why? Bethany Dunn, an English Language Arts teacher at Lakota West, explains the importance of building relationships between teachers and students in our most recent Lakota Learning blog post. Below is an excerpt.*

Close your eyes and picture your favorite, most influential teacher. Try to imagine a specific memory you have with this teacher. Now, think about why you chose him or her.

My guess is that you are not currently thinking about pedagogy, organizational techniques, lesson plans, or what specific learning standards you mastered under this teacher's care.

When I began teaching 13 years ago, I believed I had to prove myself in those first days of August - prove that I was in charge; prove that I was smart; prove that I was organized and ready; prove that I knew all the answers; prove that MY class would be challenging and meaningful.

Now that I'm older, perhaps wiser, but, really because I'm a parent who has two children in Lakota schools, I have new priorities for those first days - I want my students to know I love them; I love my job; they are valued and capable of learning; this is not MY classroom, but OUR classroom.

I am certainly aware of the intense pressure on teachers and students alike these days to cover too much curriculum and to pass too many standardized tests. However, I have learned that I can cover curriculum more efficiently and effectively when my students and I have first worked to build a genuine relationship.

Earlier, when I closed my eyes, I pictured Mrs. Karen Frailie. I had the honor of being her student for two years as my junior high English teacher. I can still list the short stories, novels, and plays she taught me. I can still diagram sentences in the same format she modeled for me. Please understand: I cannot do this because I absolutely loved the literature or grammar she was teaching at the time. Instead, I remember because of Mrs. Frailie.

She intentionally built a personal relationship with me. Thus, I learned from her, and I believed her when she told me I could conquer whatever challenge she put in front of me.

When Mrs. Frailie passed away, I was gifted the lesson plan book for the class she taught me. Each square is filled to the brim - day after day is packed with meticulous plans for what the class would learn - except one. The first day of school has two words written on it: Welcome Students. Mrs. Frailie knew what was important on that first day—love her students, learn about them, teach them about her, and build community.

That first day was not wasted. I remember her and what she taught me because she chose to invest in me—from day one.

As a teacher, I've learned to reframe my thinking about those first days of school. Am I losing precious time to teach? Nope. I teach several lessons those first days: Humans over data. Relationships over rules. Students first. Learning requires community.

I want my students to feel welcomed, known, and empowered—from day one.

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