

The 4 C's That Help Students Strive for Their Very Best!

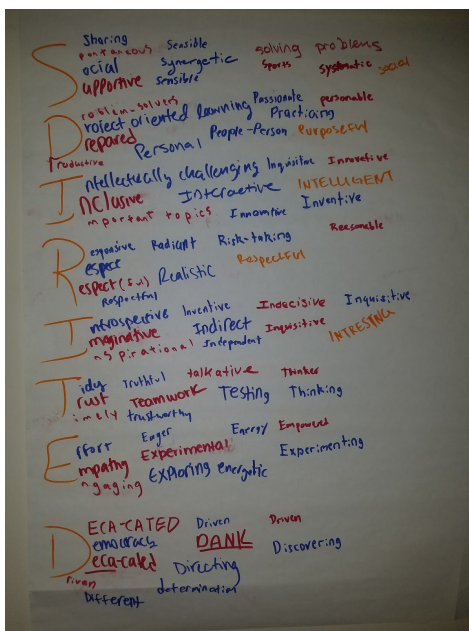
Here are letters strung together to cause a shiver in nearly every student - GPA, SAT, EOC, EOG, ACT, MACC: Large, high-stakes, standardized tests. Forward-thinking districts are creating conditions in which these are becoming a thing of the past. Districts and universities that rely on letter grades, end of course assessments and "college entrance" exams to measure their students' worth are doing a disservice. The effects on students of that disservice - stress, depression, or worse - is already well-documented. Progressive classrooms focus on mission and process, not curriculum and letter grades. The letters that are critical for student success are acronyms with much different outcomes than simply building transcripts; they are helping to nurture thinkers, doers, innovators.

"In the often ideologically driven debates about education, it is easy to lose sight of what matters most - which is what happens between students and teachers everyday in the classroom."

From the conclusion of The Global Achievement Gap, Dr. Tony Wagner

From year one, my educational journey has involved the acronym, SPIRITED. SPIRITED can be found in my educational mission statement, which has remained the same throughout my teaching career.

My educational mission is to provide a SPIRITED learning environment in which students feel comfortable and confident to strive for their very best.

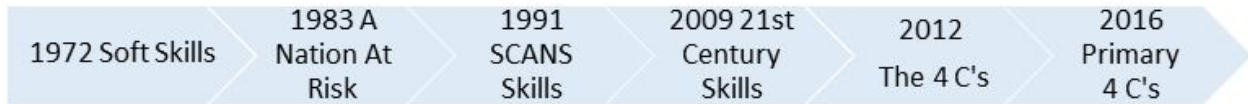


SPIRITED: Stimulating, Positive, Initiative, Respect, Integrity, Empathy & Enthusiasm Determination. Everything I do in my classroom or on behalf of students has to have one or more of these key ingredients, or I find a different way. The word spirited in itself is such a wonderful word, it could be used on its own and have plenty of impact. When you break the word down like this, the influence is exponential.

In my classes, I usually use several icebreakers. This year, I tried a new one (as I often do). I first recited my mission statement, but I did not tell my students that spirited was an acronym. I asked student teams of 3-4 to turn the word spirited into an acronym of their own. I asked the class to think of a classroom that they would enjoy coming to each and every day. What words would they use to describe the classroom?. Each word had to begin with a letter from the word spirited. The results were pretty cool.

Community Foundations

In 2004 I earned my teaching certificate from Wayne State University in Detroit. (Shout out to WSU College of Education whose theme is, “The Effective Urban Educator: Reflective, Innovative and Committed to Diversity”.) While there, I had taken a CTE methods class with Gretchen Vermiglio, a seasoned CTE instructor from Macomb County. Her focus was on helping to develop skills that students would use after formal schooling. At the time, these skills were referred to as SCANS, Secretary of Labor’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills.



It was from this teacher preparation class and the introduction to these skills that my approach to student development and classroom leadership was founded. I have always been more concerned on facilitating learning with the goal of nurturing the whole student and inspiring parents to join. Each year I send a letter home to parents emphasizing this point,

“Success in business depends on so much more than book smarts; it requires understanding how to thrive in a business environment. I do my best to prepare young people holistically for careers and citizenship. Your student’s success is dependent on all of us working together. I am committed to the development of your child as not only a pupil of business, but also as a student of life.”

A few years ago, when we moved from Indiana to North Carolina, the rage across the country was the use of the term “4 C’s” - Communication, Creativity, Collaboration, Critical Thinking. After one full year, as much as our brand new high school wanted to be known for it, none of my students could recite all 4 C’s when called upon, let alone define them accurately or explain why they are important. The entire class couldn’t even come up with all four 4 C’s collectively. I asked myself, “if this is what we want to be known for, what are we doing to *intentionally* develop the 4 C’s?” I got to work thinking how it could be done.

My first step was to reflect upon my mission (which is what missions are for, actually). Within my mission statement are Comfort and Confidence. When the application of my mission is clicking on all cylinders, we create Community and Culture; it is a process. This is how I came up with what I now call **The Primary 4 C’s**. Without **The Primary 4 C’s**, the skill-based 4 C’s will be more difficult for teachers to apply in the classroom and for students to learn. Therefore, we can conclude that **The Primary 4 C’s** are actually more important than the proverbial 4 C’s.

Implementing The Primary 4 C’s

The first order of business is to make certain that students are comfortable with one another in the classroom. This is accomplished through ice breakers, team building, mixing up seating

arrangements everyday (which actually creates some discomfort and is necessary for growth) and beginning peer evaluation from the very first assignments.



***Intentionally developing all 4 C's in Week One:
Solving Problems Using Lego Team Building Activity***

My students spend the first 6-8 class periods doing this. Once comfort has been reached, students begin to gain confidence in themselves and one another. As a part of confidence building we lay down the rule of “no put downs” and “there is no such thing as a bad idea”. I take this sincerely and consider a snicker, a chuckle or even a rolling of the eyes as a put down.

It has been proven (not empirically, but from my fifteen years in a CTE classroom) that when students are comfortable in the class, confident in themselves and assured of a risk-free environment, they become a community, “. . . the shared attributes of the people in it, and/or by the strength of the connections among them.” ([Blogspot](#)) Community can also be defined as the culture of the classroom. According to Google, culture is, “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively.” That’s pretty cool, “regarded collectively”! The “manifestations of human intellectual achievement” come from the exercise of

the 'usual' 4 C's; these never would have come to fruition had the time not been taken to first develop **The Primary** 4 C's - Comfort, Confidence, Community and Culture.

Engaging students with the proverbial 4 C's

While all can work in unison, each of the 4 C's are introduced in my class in a particular order. First comes communication, all four aspects of it - reading, writing, speaking and listening. Once we begin to gain the hang of it, we can become more creative. Creativity is the expression of one's ideas. Isn't "expression" a form of communication that reveals itself in some other form? Once creative ideas begin to be spoken, it offers opportunity for feedback, critique and building on other people's ideas. Hm, that sounds a lot like collaboration. Then, as the ideas begin to take shape, we begin to question - is it the right idea, can we improve upon it, do we have all the information we need to perfect it, how can we do it better? Whew! We may have finally reached the pinnacle, critical thinking.

“The goal of education should be creating men and women who are not simply repeating what other generations have done; who are creative, inventive and discoverers, who can be critical and verify, and not accept, everything they are offered.” Jean Piaget

Not all 4 C's can manifest themselves without the help of other C's. By that I mean, to be truly creative you need to be able to express your ideas through some form of communication. Also, superb collaboration requires effective communication. If we are to assume critical thinking reveals itself by asking quality, probing questions, have you ever seen this done aloud (speaking) if people aren't part of a cohesive, safe community and willing to communicate openly with one another? Do you feel safe asking questions in front of people for whom you have little trust? OK, maybe you have, but high school students don't ask enough questions.

Start with comfort; this leads to confidence; this leads to community and culture. Once a positive culture is established people begin to communicate, and before you know it, your class is kicking it into high gear! Everyone should strive for a C, actually eight of them. Imagine the transcript, 8.0!

What is your classroom's mission statement?