

Why Empathy?

A Case for Promoting Empathy in Schools



Equip Students

Empathy doesn't just mean treating others better—it means *doing* better.

Empathy helps us understand and treat one another better, but it's also a key currency in a world defined by connectivity and change. **Gone are the days in which we worked and lived only alongside those who looked the same, spoke the same, and thought the same.**

How well we do—whether in the classroom or the boardroom—will depend on how well we forge and navigate relationships.

If we can empathize then we can communicate, collaborate, and lead. We can solve problems—for ourselves and for each other. No matter who we are or what we do.

Equip Students:

Advanced Skill Building:

The world of repetition—of mastering a task or trade and doing it over and over—is being replaced by one of rapid change. New rules, new openness, and new connectivity require different sets of skills just to keep up, let alone thrive.

Ask an expert: “Today, knowledge is ubiquitous, constantly changing, growing exponentially...Today, knowledge is free. It’s like air, it’s like water...There’s no competitive advantage today in knowing more than the person next to you...What the world cares about is what you can do with what you know.”

—Tony Wagner, *author of Creating Innovators*

Fact: The rate of turnover within the list of Fortune 500 companies has accelerated each decade since the 1950s.¹

Adaptability in the Workforce:

Already, leaders in a wide variety of fields—from business to journalism, medicine, robotics engineering, and technology development—cite the critical role that empathy plays in their employees’ and their business’ success.

Ask an expert: “In the growing global economy, empathy is a critical skill for both getting along with diverse workmates and doing business with people from other cultures...[A]s the tasks of leadership become more complex and collaborative, relationship skills become increasingly pivotal.”

—Daniel Goleman, *author of New Leaders*

Fact: The ability to collaborate was cited as the number one most important skill to succeed in the workplace by the 1,700 CEOs surveyed in IBM’s 2012 Global Chief Executive Officer Study. Communicative and creative were #2 and #3.

Increased Social Intelligence:

Empathy is foundational to social and relational intelligence, which are increasingly valued as top skills in school and in the workplace.

Ask an expert: “An abundance of research has demonstrated associations between empathy and a variety of desirable outcomes including positive peer relationships, better communication skills, and fewer interpersonal conflicts.”

—*Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 2012*

Fact: In one study begun in the 1950s and conducted over the next 40 years, social intelligence was found to be four times more likely than IQ to predict professional success and prestige.²

Transform Our Schools

Empathy isn't just an add-on or a "nice-to-have": it's critical to creating the kind of conditions in which real learning can take place.

Numerous studies have shown that **practicing empathy leads to improved classroom management and more time for learning**, for the simple reason that students arrive in class more ready to learn. Teachers, meanwhile, are better equipped to deal with the host of unmet social and emotional needs that students don't leave behind at the schoolhouse door.

Yet it's not enough to focus on students alone: improving teacher efficacy and retention demands that administrators treat teachers with the same level of trust, agency, and understanding they afford their students.

Transform Our Schools:

Stronger Student & Teacher Trust:

One caring and supportive adult outside a child's immediate family—who both sets high expectations and provides the tools to meet them—can have a marked impact not only on short-term academic performance, but on a child's success decades later.³

Ask an expert: “From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents; it's the person standing at the front of the classroom.”

—President Barack Obama, *March 2009*.⁴

Fact: In one study, elementary schools with high relational trust saw an average increase in student learning of 8% in reading and 20% in mathematics over a five-year period.⁵

Researchers have also found that a student's level of pro-social behavior in the third grade is a better predictor of academic outcomes five years later than is his or her academic achievement.⁶

Improved School Safety:

Legislation alone isn't going to fix the bullying crisis: we need to combat bullying before it starts, by equipping kids with the skills they need to resolve conflict, and to stand up rather than stand by.

Ask an expert: “As a society, we short-change young people by focusing them on what not to do: “say no to drugs” or “don't be a bully”. We rarely suggest or celebrate all that they can do to take action and bring about meaningful change. And yet from Damascus

to Des Moines we are seeing engaged youth leading with powerful examples of peacemaking.”

—Eric Dawson, *Founder, Peace First*

Fact: Numerous studies have linked empathy to a variety of desirable outcomes, including positive peer relationships, better communication skills, and fewer interpersonal conflicts.⁷ By the same token, an absence of empathy has been associated with several negative outcomes such as aggressive behaviors and emotional disorders.⁸

Higher Teacher Retention & Improved Effectiveness:

Teacher stress and well-being can determine teacher performance, and accordingly, that of their students. A culture of empathy and support for teachers sets the tone for an entire school.

Ask an expert: “All of us know that when we are in an environment that's caring, respectful and positive, we perform better and are able to give more of ourselves. Teachers are no different. If we want students to learn more, we must begin by showing teachers real empathy, helping them to both grow socially and emotionally. The result is not only that they stay in the classroom longer; they are fundamentally better teachers because of it.”

—Ellen Moir, *Founder, New Teacher Center*

Fact: Currently, nearly 50% of teachers leave the profession in 3-5 years, and U.S. schools spend \$7.3 billion per year on costs related to teacher turnover.⁹

Change the World

Empathy gives us both the will and the tools to be effective changemakers.

Ours is a world that is full of complex challenges, where the decisions of one can affect the whole: a fact made all too clear by the financial crisis, violence in our schools and communities, and a host of global challenges threatening our collective well-being. The faster we master empathy, the faster we can look beyond our past squabbles and build lasting solutions where others still see problems.

Empathy motivates us to act and build something better together. But it also ensures we act well: informed by a deep understanding and respect for others, working collaboratively across disciplinary boundaries, and creatively addressing problems at their root.

Change the World:

More Innovation & Creativity:

Our ability to take on the perspective of others is part of what makes us human and it's core to what makes us imaginative. The best innovators—whether in business or civil society—are capable of exploring problems and their solutions from all angles. Their solutions are “sticky” because people feel understood and adopt those solutions as their own.

Ask an expert: “To create meaningful innovations, you need to know users and care about their lives... Empathy is the centerpiece of a human-centered design process.”

—“*An Introduction to Design Thinking*”, the d-school at Stanford University

More Collaborative Problem-Solving:

Empathy helps us to more effectively work in teams by understanding and leveraging the unique contributions each individual might make. When we appreciate the motivations, fears, strengths, and weaknesses of others, we can work more productively together in solving complex problems that affect us all.

Ask an expert: “Action orientation without sufficient empathy has at least two flaws. First, people resist going along with proposed actions, which can impede progress. Second, if people do go along, they do so reluctantly, leading to an atmosphere of compliance rather than engagement.”

—Daniel Pink, *author of A Whole New Mind*

Stronger, More Participatory Democracies:

Empathetic citizens are not only more likely to passively tolerate those with whom they disagree, but they are also more likely to listen to the ideas put forward by those with contradictory views. An empathetic society—and planet—is one that moves beyond stigma toward equality, respect, and solidarity.

Ask an expert: “Empathy is the soul of democracy. It is an acknowledgment that each life is unique, unalienable, and deserving of equal consideration in the public square.”

—Jeremy Rifkin, *author of The Empathic Civilization*

“Schools that help develop cooperative moral sentiments—empathy, trust, benevolence, and fairness—contribute a great deal to democratic education.”

—Amy Gutmann, *President, University of Pennsylvania*

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- ⁹ "Tapping the Potential: Retaining & Developing High-Quality New Teachers." Washington D.C.: **Alliance for Excellent Education**: <http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/TappingThePotential/TappingThePotential.pdf>

