



DIFFERENCES IN SMALL DOSES

Today, more than even a few years ago, students lack the motivation to study and do well in school. Every day, I am surrounded by people my age who just don't see the point of achievement or hard work. In other words, they're not interested in doing their best. In fact, at Warren High School, students work hardest at being average – or worse. It's "cool" to use profanity, violate the dress code and play dumb in class. So it can be challenging to make a difference on this campus, where students underestimate themselves and deliberately play down the idea of what's possible.

Even middle school students aren't immune to this deliberate lowering of self-expectations. At the end of eighth grade, five-semester scholars at Griffiths have the chance to speak publicly at Honor's Night. As one of those students, I took the opportunity to express my thoughts about homework as optional, a punishment, or a chore, but as one of many helpful ways to remember what you learned in school that day. I also said that I cared more about doing my best than about doing what was "cool" because trying my hardest is what makes me feel good about myself. My speech concentrated on what I as a student could control and change about my learning environment. It's not that I'm not grateful for the support of my wonderful family and teachers, but I truly believe that finally, it's up to the individual student to create his or her own success, and to stop relying on the constant prodding of others. The following year at Warren, a fellow classmate told me, "Hey, remember Honor's Night back at Griffiths? Well, the only speech I remember is yours." I had succeeded in planting a seed: the idea of being proud to do one's best. I felt I had made a difference.

However, you don't have to speak publicly to make a difference. Actions speak louder than words. For example, last year in a required class at Warren, a boy kept asking me, "Why do you always do your homework?" And I answered, "I do my homework because it doesn't take that long to complete, and it's easier than coming up with lies for the teacher about why I didn't do it. Taking notes helps me remember what I learn, and since I want to be successful, I do it. What I do is probably easier than all the effort you put into getting out of class assignments." Later, I saw him show the teacher his homework for the first time. From that day on, his grade improved because he actually tried to take notes and pay attention in class. I felt I had made a difference in his life.

American middle and high school students aren't the only ones who set low expectations for themselves. I visited Quebec this summer and met my pen pal Felicité Pepin. She doesn't lack motivation to do her best, but following her family's example, it hadn't occurred to her to want more than a high school diploma. So I spoke to her about the doors that college degrees and a richer work experience could open for her. I only stayed in Quebec for a week, but my words got her thinking about her future. One night, we talked with other friends who were attending college, and I spoke of my own excitement about enrolling at university. I saw Félicité observe us, not saying a word, but I knew she was pondering the possibilities out there. At the end of the conversation, she finally said, "You know, I might go to college, I'm not sure yet." I was satisfied. Sometimes differences are made one little step, one little thought, one little behavior at a time.