

Complaining About Students Is Toxic. Here Are 4 Ways to Stop

By Lauren Vargas

June 11, 2019

As a teacher, I spent many mornings waiting in line to make copies for my lessons that day. Coffee in hand, I competed with my fellow waiting colleagues in the Misery Olympics of Teaching: We'd banter back and forth about whose teaching life was more miserable.



Some of those complaints were about our own lives, like this: "I was in grad class until 10 p.m. last night and then I had to grade 30 essays." But invariably, part of our griping was about our students. For years, I'd say things like this: "My third period class is driving me crazy!" or "When will Ben ever stop talking?" or "Why won't my students turn homework in?!"

Sound familiar? Complaining about students happens in teachers' lounges and copy rooms all over the country. Teaching is hard work. But complaining about students is not only toxic for teachers' feelings about their work (and therefore their longevity in their jobs). It's detrimental to students.

Now my job is to support instructional coaches in their work with teachers, and I get to hear to what pre-K through high school teachers say when they are meeting with their coaches. I am caught off guard more often than I would expect by negative comments about students from even the most otherwise positive teachers. Here's a sample of the comments I've heard recently:

- "I have two kids who are really big babies. They always need my attention. I don't think they can do it on their own."
- "I just don't think this will work with Daniel; he's one of my older kids."
- "You know this is a Title I school, right?"
- "These kids just aren't motivated."

How educators talk about students matters. No matter how much planning time we put into lessons or how much we say we believe all kids can achieve, when we make comments like these it impacts how well we can help all students reach their highest potential.

Why is complaining about students detrimental?

- **It reinforces low expectations.** By complaining about students, we reinforce the idea that they're not capable of meeting high expectations. And complaining with other teachers can create a space where low expectations are validated within the school community.
- **It absolves teachers of responsibility to reach all students, and blames students instead.** As the instructional leaders of our classrooms, we need to be reflective about what changes we can make that will help all students engage and learn better. By blaming students, teachers fail to grow; instead, they are defensive when given feedback. Dr. Haim Ginott wrote in *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*, "I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous."
- **It creates distance between students and teachers.** Complaining about students with other teachers can create an us versus them mentality. I was a young, white, middle-class teacher who taught mostly low-income students of color. By participating with other (mostly) young, white, middle-class teachers in complaining about students, I unintentionally reinforced racist and classist norms that schooling should look like me and my culture and students just needed to get on board.
- **It creates a toxic work culture.** Complaining breeds negative feelings about our work. When I'm repeating a message that students aren't motivated and there's nothing I can do about it, I start to

feel less motivated myself to teach my best lessons every day. Ultimately, feeling frustrated about students regularly can contribute to teacher burnout, instead of a lifelong career of meeting students where they are and joyfully engaging with them there.

4 Strategies to Counter a Culture of Complaining

#1 - Consider your vocabulary.

This isn't about political correctness. It's about simply treating students the way we would want to be treated. Here are a few words and phrases to eliminate that reflect low expectations of students:

- They are babies
- They aren't motivated
- They have an IEP
- They are low-flyers
- This generation
- Their parents aren't engaged

#2 - Take the one-week complaint-free challenge.

Try not to say anything negative about a student for a week. Take time to notice the moments when you want to complain, and how you feel when you cut out the complaining.

#3 - Call out your colleagues when they complain.

I often felt that complaining was the norm at my school, and I now regret not taking a more active role to confront that culture directly. When you hear educators complaining about students, make an active choice to sit it out. Even better, find a direct but kind way to call it out. Try, "I know we all love our students. Instead of focusing on the negative, what's something you're thankful for about your students today?" And this shouldn't fall only on teachers—school leaders can play a key role here by setting clear expectations for how teachers and staff should talk about students.

#4 - Replace complaining with joy and thankfulness.

Find something positive to talk about. Consider what conversations will bring about more equitable outcomes for students, more joy for you and your colleagues, and closer relationships within the school community. Talk about what you are thankful for, how you've seen students grow or challenge themselves, or even ask questions to get you know your colleagues better.

Mental health counselor and author Kristin Souers said in a presentation about her book, *Relationship, Responsibility and Regulation: Trauma-Invested Practices for Fostering Resilient Learners*, "We need to remember to speak kindly about our students and kindly about each other." When kindness replaces complaining about kids, it can transform our expectations of our students as well as our workplace culture.

Lauren Vargas is currently the director of instructional coaching for EdConnective. She has worked as a school-based and virtual instructional coach and taught high school mathematics for nine years in North Philadelphia.

WEB ONLY