

# 6 Qualities of a Star Teacher

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# Introduction

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What does the term “star teacher” mean to you? What kinds of dispositions do star teachers embody? And, what makes a star teacher successful in the classroom? During many years of working with urban teachers and students, we’ve observed that successful star teachers have a genuine interest in the lives of their students and in those who can become partners in helping students reach their full potential. By taking steps to learn about and connect with students and those who can support them, teachers can become “stars” who are able to create the type of learning environment that supports student success.

Here, we look at six distinct, yet somewhat overlapping qualities that star teachers personify.

## Embody Respect

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When working with students in poverty, star teachers give respect to students and parents first. They allow students to see respectful conversations with parents, hear sincere attempts to communicate with caregivers, and witness how parents are welcomed to the school and classroom. Star teachers do not use sarcasm or demean parents, even when the parents do not exhibit healthy parenting skills. They also do not demean students when they are managing classroom situations, when a student may have difficulty understanding a particular concept, or when a student or parent speaks differently or looks differently than the teacher.

Star teachers model adult thinking and try to think strategically. For example, they may model thinking by way of a concept map or through the higher-order thinking processes. They make this type of thinking transparent. That is, star teachers tend to think out loud so that students can see the steps. This models a respect for learning.

In addition, star teachers share the decision making. For example, when creating classroom guidelines, those guidelines are co-created with students. That way, students also have a say in what happens in their classroom. This gives students ownership for their learning. Star teachers respect student thoughts and ideas for classroom governance.

## Embed Social Skills

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Star teachers try to teach basic, but crucial social skills, embedding them in everyday classroom activities and interactions. For example, they model greetings such as “Good morning, how are you today?” at the start of the day or class, or they may include formal letter writing within classroom projects. Star teachers also teach students how to work collaboratively and show respect for classmates’ ideas. They embed opportunities to teach turn-taking skills in classroom lessons, and they teach students how to ask questions and to develop an argument with evidence.

They remind students to act positively instead of negatively, and to thank their classmates after completing collaborative activities. Star teachers implement social–emotional skill-building

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programs in the early years and teach children how to express feelings of happiness, anger, or sadness. They may implement this type of skill building by using puppets, storytelling, or games. At the middle and high school level, the classroom and the school should be places of opportunity for engagement in positive social interactions. Adults in the school model by example and create the necessary venues for the development of these skills. For example, some schools use clubs and field trips as an opportunity to teach students to tie a tie, to order food in a nice restaurant, or to know the social expectations when visiting places like college campuses and upscale venues.

### Be Inclusive

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Star teachers create inclusive classroom environments. They refer to the school as “our school” and to the class as “our class.” Star teachers welcome and work with students of all abilities. They create a community in the classroom where students and families feel respected and valued. When you walk into a star teacher’s classroom, you might see student projects on the walls, as well as photos and posters of diverse role models so that students see brightly colored walls covered with the possibility of themselves. The neighborhood where the school is located may be economically challenged, but star teachers know that this is even more of a reason to create a welcoming environment.

Every student should be able to attend a school where, when you walk up to the building, the environmental message is, “You are important here.” We have found that when the principal and the teachers ask parents and community members to help, many will gladly clean up, fix up, and paint when needed. Not only does this improve the look and feel of the school, but it also increases buy-in from those who help.

The classroom is a family—a safe place where students feel comfortable being themselves. A safe, inclusive classroom sends the message that the classroom is a place where students matter and learning is the primary goal. Star teachers include all students in discussions and classroom activities. They model and identify desired classroom behavior, use frequent affirmations, and point out talents. Star teachers provide opportunities for students to revel in their accomplishments. Star teachers acknowledge the fact that students are in school and engaged in learning because they recognize that for some, just getting to school in the morning is a challenge. While insisting on excellence, star teachers celebrate effort as well as achievement. They stress the process of learning as well as the product.

Star teachers work with the building principal to be sure that all families are included in school events. The schedule of events, the communications that are sent, the fees for events (if needed), and the structure of the events signal to families that all are welcome.

### Alter the Environment

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Star teachers know that students can get labeled (e.g., smart, not smart, good, bad) by other students and other teachers through the use of certain practices such as rigid ability grouping

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or the public display of names of students who forget homework or misbehave. Those labels tend to follow students through their entire career, affecting their performance and their self-esteem. Creating a caring community in the classroom, be it kindergarten or high school, is a top priority for a star teacher. If students are given responsibility and empowered to learn through engaging and relevant curriculum, activity-oriented pedagogy, and choice within parameters, they will rise to any challenge that the teacher puts before them.

The same holds true for all aspects of the school environment. When students have real input into and engagement with disciplinary policies and practices (e.g., restorative justice practices), and when students see that the school understands and is willing to make accommodations for the real lives of the students (e.g., a place to do homework when the student does not have a stable place to live, snacks when a student is living with food insecurity), they will take advantage of opportunities to learn.

### Keep Expectations High

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Star teachers do not fall into the trap of feeling sorry for students and lowering high expectations for them because of their life circumstances. It is difficult to see students and their families struggle, yet star teachers have empathy rather than sympathy, the latter of which can lead to letting students off the hook for learning. Star teachers hold the expectations bar high, and then provide the supports necessary to reach for the stars. They tell students every day that they are smart and that they can be successful. Then, they provide the learning environment, the types of activities, and the pedagogical practices that lead to success. For example, star teachers would rarely, if ever, call on students to read aloud or answer a question without providing support for success. They might allow a minute of “think time” before calling on students; they might provide a practice pad where students can figure out answers before being asked to publicly display them; or they may give silent, preview reading time before asking a student to read a passage aloud.

Star teachers encourage self-reflection by involving students in grading, parent–teacher conferences, and progress assessment, seeking the student’s opinion on how he or she is doing academically and socially. Star teachers implement practices such as having students keep portfolios of work samples where they periodically assess their own progress, self-assess mathematics objectives at the end of a unit, or create assessment rubrics for an assignment in collaboration with their peers. Star teachers ask themselves, “What am I doing, and what decisions am I making that the students could make or be involved in?” And star teachers seek input from the students on how to hold themselves accountable. They use student feedback to continually work toward democratic, emancipatory practices that lead to both students and teachers becoming their best selves.

### Increase Health-Related Services

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Students whose families live in poverty often do not have access to a doctor, dentist, or mental health professional. Living with medical and dental needs can seriously affect learning. It is

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important that the teacher, principal, and support staff are aware of the needs of students and work to ensure that each student is healthy. In many school districts serving students who live in poverty, a school nurse and a school counselor are luxuries. What can teachers and principals do in such situations? Actually, there is a lot that can be done!

To get started, teachers and administrators must make themselves aware of all of the local, state, and national resources that are available for developing and implementing a comprehensive school-wide health program. Star teachers do the research that is necessary to access all available resources. Often, there are local and state agencies that are able to provide health-related services free of charge or at a very minimal cost. Once teachers have identified these resources, they develop a plan to meet the needs of students and families. They do not let bureaucracy stand in their way. If there is an obstacle, they find a way to work around it to get the services that their students deserve.

We have seen teachers, parents, and local community groups write a grant that put a health clinic in a middle school located in an extremely challenged neighborhood. The grant paid for the remodeling of a corridor in the school; for rooms that housed a counselor, a dentist, a nurse, and a doctor; and a tutoring center. Other schools have enlisted the help of local colleges and universities that have medical schools, counseling and school psychology programs, and other health-related degree programs. They have staffed their school with interns who are supervised by university faculty. Yet others have enlisted retired doctors, nurses, and mental health professionals to volunteer weekly time in their building. This may be the hardest aspect of a teacher's job, because it involves working outside of the classroom to get resources for students that allow them to perform to their best ability inside of the classroom. But, if you are a star teacher, it is impossible for you to sit back and do nothing if there is a way to solve a problem that is keeping a student from learning.

## Closing Thoughts

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The success of a star teacher is built upon a strong foundation of deep and mutually respectful relationships that the teacher develops with students, their families, and members of the school and local community. Star teachers are role models and advocates for students. They do not expect students to exhibit behaviors and attitudes that they themselves do not exemplify. It is important that students see their teachers as embodying respect for all, implementing inclusive practices, and holding high expectations for everyone. Students and parents should see the teachers as willing to speak up and out for them, to advocate for resources, policies, and practices that maximize student success.

**Maureen D. Gillette** and **Djanna A. Hill** are coauthors of the new second edition of *Star Teacher of Children in Poverty* (2018, Routledge & KDP).