

# Failure Preferred, Actually

Rick Wormeli

February 2009

[Original Draft]

Let's stop demonizing failure. It will be our undoing.

I'm not advocating that we celebrate low test scores or students' dashed dreams. I am calling for a shift in metaphors from failure as student's foe to failure as student's ally, and a move away from the presumption of F's and zeroes on inadequately performed tasks as the best way to build students' self-discipline. Failure can teach us in ways that consistent success cannot. Wandering down blind alleys, fumbling through half-baked ideas, and mixing the wrong ingredients often yield new insights. This is the stuff of scientific, mathematical, literary, and societal progress.

Multiple industries advance as a result of failures: medicine, bridge construction, dentistry, investment firms, culinary arts, and space travel are just some of the industries that have improved dramatically due to insights gained through past failures. In some cases, there was a horrific outcome of these failures: people died, but what an even greater loss to never have learned from those mistakes and taken steps to make sure they never happened again. Automobile companies crash cars – a catastrophic failure for a car – on purpose so they can make the car more successful, i.e. improve their safety for human passengers. Failure here leads to the better outcome.

Take a look at the NMSA's *This We Believe* materials, *Turning Points 2000*, or the on-line research at [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org): middle level students are in prime exploration mode. They require ample opportunities to wrestle with ideas, not have those ideas spoon fed to them. They should feel safe and invited to experiment and fail in the middle of class or at home as they learn new material. Unfortunately, the way we've set things up in many middle schools, students consider academic struggle and undeveloped skills as being weak. Instead, we have to make them a sign of strength.

Let's make it okay to fail in the pursuit of learning. One of the most vivid ways we can do this is to model it. We set up real situations in which we do not know answers or how to solve problems – really not know something, not just faking it -- then find the answer or solve the problem constructively in front of students so they see what it looks like to not know something, to handle it wisely, and to remain a respected individual in the community. Many middle school students do not push themselves to explore different talents or new thinking because they are focused on protecting their reputations as the persons who always get the right answers or who answer questions first. What potential is lost because a student needs to protect his personal status quo!

To make it acceptable to fail in the pursuit of learning, we also have to remove the grade myopia placed on many of our assignments. Some students find it easier, for example, to say they forgot the homework, didn't have time to complete it, or they chose not to do the assignment rather than to attempt it, do poorly, and face the truth they do not understand something and be labeled ignorant as a result. Realizing some of our students feel this way is a red flag that our classroom cultures are not where we want them to be. Our students should have every confidence that their attempts to wrestle with content and skills as they practice them will be met with only support and encouragement; judgment and ridicule are not even on the radar scope.

One of the worst perpetrators of an unhealthy avoidance of failure is the pressure we feel from state or provincial testing. Due to the nature of standardization protocols, it's almost impossible to create a test that is financially feasible and legally defensible that also allows for more than one correct answer. As a result, schools promote the philosophy that there is just one answer from a selected group, or just one way to write an essay. We become formulaic and limit students' learning and thereby their growth. Remember the old analogy questions on the SAT test? For some of us, we often felt we could argue for two or three of the choices, depending on the context, but instead we dutifully spent our test time trying to guess what the test-makers intended, even though we knew it showed limited imagination. Conform, or show the divergent and synectic thinking that you are truly capable of performing – what kind of choice is that to foist upon the next generation?

Check out NCTE's flagship publications, *English Journal* and *Voices in the Middle*. The National Council for Teachers of English frequently calls for English teachers in middle schools to question the teaching of the 5-paragraph essay as the only way to create an essay. Instead, we teach students that some paragraphs are too weak to stand alone and therefore should be combined, or that that one paragraph has too many topics and should be broken into two or more. Rather than giving students a template in which they fill in the missing spaces with a teacher's pre-determined correct answers, we serve students better to build within them the mental dexterity needed to respond to varied paragraphing that best suits their intended audience and purpose for writing. Trying, failing, revising, trying again, revising again as they develop this skill prepares them for life far more than presenting them a passive recipe to follow.

In his 2008 book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner asked dozens of employers – both blue and white collar professions – to identify their number one characteristic they want to see in potential employees. No matter the level of the job, every employer responded with the same characteristic: “Do they know how to ask good questions?” Daniel Pink in his 2006, *A Whole New Mind* claims that high-concept, right-brain thinking which is often messy but full of “outside the box” thinking will be the new “it” skill for future employees to have on their resume as we evolve beyond left-brain protocol thinking in manufacturing and business. If our students are going to be prepared for the 21<sup>st</sup> century professions, then, we have to make it safe to ask questions, to see adults and culture as fallible, and to experiment with more than a 50-50 chance of failing.

Russian composer, Igor Stravinsky, once said, “I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes and pursuits of false assumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge.” Imagine the beauty and insight that would have been lost if he had succumbed to the “correct answer” dogma or if he never allowed himself to fail in his attempts at composing. We don’t want a generation of citizens to spend their days avoiding failure when it so readily leads to a positive future.

In our classrooms, let’s make failure a valued route to learning. Here are thirteen specific suggestions to get started:

1. Privately or publicly affirm students who attempt something initially beyond their reach regardless of their success. Make this a weekly recognition.
2. Make sure all students experience failure once a grading period, particularly your high performing students. Middle school is the time to experience what it’s like to hit a brick wall and then develop the coping strategies to navigate around or through it. We want students to learn these skills now, while the stakes aren’t so high and they have a solid “pit crew” (us) to get them back on track again. Students who coast unchallenged in middle school often don’t develop these skills. They fall apart in later years of high school or college when the stakes are much higher.
3. Model how to fail at something and to handle it constructively. Ask students who are willing to help promote this message to demonstrate it as well. Invite administrators, other teachers, and members of the community to stop by and give testimony to failure as well.
4. Frequently relate the stories of famous figures in history, sports, politics, entertainment, and other professions who failed in some way but learned from the experience and grew as a result. Students are consummate story-receivers; they’ll remember the lessons learned.
5. Overtly teach problem-solving skills regardless of whether or not it’s an official part of your curriculum. This is often referred to as, “the hidden curriculum,” – It’s those values and skills for living life that all citizens should have. Skills to develop in students include task analysis (breaking down tasks into smaller pieces), revising one’s thinking in light of new evidence, developing more than response, looking at something from multiple angles, weighing the pro’s and con’s of different options, using trial and error, seeking advice from trusted others, thinking critically about arguments and ideology, preparing before a challenging task, learning from mistakes, controlling impulsive thinking, considering consequences, and knowing which questions to ask.
6. Create a “Wall of Failure Success” in which you identify students (with their permission) who failed at something initially, but learned from the

experience and eventually became successful with that skill or topic. Be specific in telling their stories.

7. Frequently brainstorm constructive responses to what appears to initial failures. Use hypothetical situations so students can safely converse about failures without feeling the added pressure of having failed at something. They'll remember some of the solutions, but even better, they'll feel comfortable asking for help when they do fail. These conversations set the tone that failure is acceptable.
8. Teach students about the formative nature of classwork and homework, then live up to that promise. This means we reduce the influence of formative assessments and assignments on the overall subject grade. This opens homework to its true roles: to practice, reinforce, and expand students' skills and knowledge as they come to know our topics, not as the final declaration of proficiency. It gives them license to explore and extend themselves without worry.
9. Ask students questions to which you do not know the answer already. This can be a scary thing for teachers who are used to facilitating everything, including eliciting pre-determined responses from students, but it sure is a good model for students, and it builds empathy for what they are feeling as we ask them to take risks.
10. Make it possible for students to ask more questions in class than you do. We find that whoever is asking the questions is doing the learning. If we're asking the questions, we're doing the learning, and supposedly, we already know the curriculum.
11. Don't bailout students when they struggle to respond. Give them the time, including silent time for idea percolation, to come up with a valuable response. If we give them too many templates, too many hints, they quickly learn that we'll rescue them from ignorance. This doesn't mean we're insensitive, just that we give them the tools, and often let them find their way to use them without our interference.
12. Remove all posters and promotional materials that express the sentiment, "Failure is not an option." There's a popular book and program with this title that I heartily recommend, but their title is unfortunate. Of course, the statement means that we don't give up on students, or claim our hands are tied due to circumstances beyond our control when students struggle, nor do we allow students to give up on themselves; we build resilience. Students who see only this phrase on a cafeteria banner, however, take it to heart without the benefit of the author's full explanation. Blankenstein's ideas for working with struggling students are very appropriate and should be implemented in many middle schools, but students who see just the catch phrase do worse than miss the point; they think failure is something

to avoid. My heart sinks every time I see the phrase paraded in front of students and teachers.

13. Allow re-tests, re-takes, and re-do's for 100% full credit. I know this will frustrate some teachers, but at some point we have to accept the fact that re-doing something is one of the most powerful teaching tools we have, and in reality, competent adults are competent because they learned those advanced skills repeatedly – not in a one-shot unit at the end of February. In the training for every profession, including teaching, we are encouraged to make initial attempts and as we fail, we are given descriptive feedback on what to do differently in order to be successful in our subsequent attempts. This feedback is meaningful for having gone through the task at least once. For this to work, however, we have to receive full credit for what we learn. Why would we take this highly effective strategy away from students who need it most?

Of course, this mindset about failure's positives only works if teachers don't let failure become a liability for students. For example, a student who says, "I don't care if I fail, school sucks!" is not someone who should be left in charge of his own learning and destiny. Many of our students do not have the maturity and training to be given such responsibility; they can influence it, but as mature guides, we help give it direction. Some teachers, however, abdicate their teaching responsibilities by turning learning over to their students completely. They declare, "Students have to meet me half way," and, "An F on that quiz will teach him to straighten up."

Neither is true. If a student doesn't "meet [the teacher] halfway," does the teacher back off and say there's nothing he can do to help the student? No. Like a good editor working with a writer, the teacher saves the student from himself. He investigates and takes corrective action. He does not allow the students' immaturity to dictate the extent of the student's learning. In addition, getting an F on a quiz without facility to learn from the mistake and revise one's preparation and later performance on that quiz does not teach students self-responsibility. It breeds resentment, divesture from the class, and in some cases, unethical behaviors like cheating and lying. We can turn both of these experiences in failure around by greeting initial failure as students' first round of learning and providing the support and direction they need to crawl from the pit students have dug for themselves.

F's and zeroes without remediation and hope do not teach students. If a student fails to do an assignment and we tell him that he's not allowed to do the assignment later so he'll receive a zero grade on it, we've just told the student that the assignment had no educational value and that it's okay if he doesn't learn the material. Both of these are unacceptable: We shouldn't be assigning anything that is "skippable" or without value, and if it's important enough to be assigned to students to learn, we don't undo that by letting them off the hook later. The consequence for not doing the learning is doing the learning, not escape from that learning.

We're not looking for students' demise, but effective teachers embrace the opportunities afforded by failure. Failure to effective teachers is not a bad thing; it's an important tool of learning. Snowboarders who appear at the end of the day with no snow on their pants are often considered slackers by their fellow boarders: they weren't trying hard enough to learn new tricks and they'll never build their boarding skills. So with our current and future students, let's

get snow on our pants and much more. Let's walk beside our students as they wander, fumble, and mix the wrong ingredients – and let's marvel at what they discover.

'Haven't failed at something yet today? 'Better get busy: You're not trying hard enough.