

By Erin Burns

# Five Habits That Lead to Ineffective Teaching—and How to Fix Them

## Observations from a School Turnaround Leader

**M**y first teaching job was as a high school biology teacher in an urban, Title 1, North Carolina school serving mostly low income, minority students. I arrived at age 22 with an inextinguishable passion for the power of education to achieve social justice, excited in particular about hands-on biology lessons. However, my pineapple eating Jello enzyme demo and edible candy DNA activities were quickly shunned by my colleagues for being too cutesy and I was instructed to drill students with multiple choice worksheets instead. I left after just one year to teach at a neighboring school that embraced my more hands-on approach. There, those same “cutesy” activities led to some of the highest student growth scores in the entire school.

Five years later, with data to back up my teaching style and some leadership experience under my belt, I ventured back to that same high school—still as underperforming as ever—where my career began. This time I was to lead the school’s biology team.



By taking concrete, actionable steps, we've achieved a big turnaround in short order. Each teacher on my team has moved from negative student growth to meeting growth standards.

I've learned a lot about the habits that can stand in the way of a teacher's success. Here are my top five:

### 1. Rigid (boring) lesson structures

Many low-performing schools fear any activity that doesn't have a rigid structure. Rigidity does not always equal rigor. For example, my teachers did a lesson in which we modeled DNA & Protein Synthesis by decoding a "DNA recipe" and creating, of all things, Rice Krispie treats. Students were up around the room transcribing mRNA to gather ingredients and make their "protein" (Rice Krispie treat). Although there were slight moments of chaos because students were so excited, every student was engaged. Students would frequently reference these types of engaging lessons and activities at the end of the year, as they had made a memorable impact. Worksheets and multiple choice drills, although they may look more controlled from an outside perspective, were not frequently referenced as having a significant impact on the students' deep understanding of the material.

### 2. Not being organized

Disorganization can lead to hours of valuable time lost, duplicating the workload for teachers. Teachers in my school used to spend hours searching for last year's flash drive, worksheet, or lesson. Teachers are not always taught how to create a systematic way to organize lessons and materials.



**“When leaders create a culture of focusing on the positive, it trickles down to teacher-student interactions.”**

I created a central repository (with the use of Google shared drives) for everyone to combine resources. We created a standardized lesson plan template built into a PowerPoint. Teachers could simply pull up the PowerPoint with directions for the activities, notes, etc., all at their fingertips. Now, my teachers know exactly where the aligned lessons are located and can focus on tweaking the lesson as opposed to repeatedly, frantically creating something from scratch.

Furthermore, teachers bought into this system because they had created the original shared lesson plan, as opposed to using a purchased, packaged curriculum.

### 3. Reactive, rather than proactive, classroom management

At my school, too many teachers previously let one disruptive student ruin the entire class period for the other 29 students eager to learn. For example, a student might have put on

headphones and disruptively started singing along. This would then be typically followed by a loud five-minute spectacle between student and teacher, ultimately ending with the student being removed from class. Inevitably these confrontations have ripple effects, resulting in multiple students being kicked out, wandering the hallways and missing out on even more instruction.

Instead, I encouraged teachers to take preventive measures. Before these incidents multiply, identify the few students in need of special emotional support and behavior correction (conferences, calls home or use of administrators). Proactively build positive relationships with those students who are behaving well.

Simply walking around the room and talking to students as individuals has an incredible impact on classroom culture. “How did you do at the game last night?” “Did you get that new job you applied for?” I would frequently model this strategy

for my teachers. This can take as few as 30 seconds, but it has big payoffs.

#### 4. Administering tests and quizzes too infrequently

It may be unpopular in this anti-testing environment to suggest more testing, not less, but it works. My team of teachers transitioned from one large test every few weeks (that wasn't revisited until the final exam), to numerous minitests and quizzes.

Now, with more frequent assessments, students have multiple attempts to show mastery of a concept. Students have hope after failing a test as opposed to just giving up and having to accept the F. We've built in opportunities for students to retest and replace poor quiz grades on large interim assessments. They always have the opportunity to work towards a higher grade and grow their knowledge of the topics covered as the semester progresses.

This change meant helping my colleagues make a shift in mindset as well as building a strongly planned assessment calendar. It's been worth it.

#### 5. Infeasible goals for improvement

In the same way that we built in an assessment calendar for our kids, those of us who lead teachers need to have a growth mindset for adults, reevaluating where an individual teacher is each week, quarter, and semester. We are told never to label students as failures—why should we do so with teachers?

When I first started working with my team, many of my teachers simply needed a shift in outlook

because they were constantly told that their students' poor test scores were all their fault. I started by acknowledging their frustrations. Oftentimes, this simply looks like a brief venting or therapy session. Yes, it can be draining for a school leader, but it is necessary to let teachers get it off their shoulders. Let their voice be heard so they can move on.

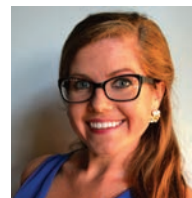
I pushed my team to grow their students as individuals. Our goal was beyond hitting a specified proficiency number, but to simply make sure our students left our classes knowing more biology than when they entered. The proficiency numbers would increase eventually if we just focused on growing students one by one.

Allowing teachers to focus on growth instead of a seemingly impossible, looming proficiency goal allows them to stop acting out in frustration to student behavior and lack of engagement, and start focusing on their individual student growth goals. When leaders create a culture of focusing on the positive, it trickles down to teacher-student interactions.

Creating a teacher turnaround plan without observing or talking to your teachers will flop. Stop boring lessons. Stop wasting time by looking for ways to work more efficiently and collaboratively. Stop modeling or allowing negative student-teacher relationships. Stop giving students only one chance to demonstrate mastery. And stop only focusing on your failing test scores. Start creating individual turn-

around plans for each of your teachers with students at the center. ■

*This is the first article of a five-part series originally published on [nctq.org](http://nctq.org).*



**Erin Burns** is in her 7th year of education. She was a North Carolina Teaching Fellow, received her bachelor's in biology with minors

in education and entrepreneurship from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and her Master of Education Leadership degree from Teachers College, Columbia University. She is currently in her second year as part of Project Lift Turnaround (a component of the Opportunity Culture), serving as a Multi-Classroom Leader in her school.



## Member Spotlight:

# A Tale of AAE-NWPE Member Dr. Angie Dorman & Friendship of Epic Proportions

**A**AE-NWPE member Dr. Angie Dorman is an esteemed historian, author, and national awarding-winning educator from the small rural town of Warden, Washington, who brings extraordinary experience to the classroom.

She received her Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of Idaho in 1988 and specialized in “20th-century America with an emphasis on women in non-traditional roles.” Through her work in this field, Angie has made friends with high-profile women of history and her story is nothing short of impressive.

According to Dorman, one of the great things about earning her Ph.D. was the research and archival work she was able to accomplish. Dorman interviewed hundreds of people throughout her research, but noted that “by far, my favorite is Betty McIntosh. Becoming friends with her has been one of the real blessings and bonuses of my life.”

Dorman met Ms. McIntosh in 1989 through John Taylor, a renowned archivist at the National Archives in Washington D.C. While helping her maneuver through heavy research materials, Taylor said, “You need to meet my friend Betty. She knows everyone.” He made a call and soon his friend Betty became Dorman’s friend, too.



In 1941, McIntosh was a young journalist in Hawaii and a graduate of the University of Washington School of Journalism. She became what *Top Secret Writers* called “one of the U.S.’s most lethal intelligence assets” after experiencing the Japanese

bombing of Pearl Harbor firsthand. After the war, McIntosh wrote a memoir of her time in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and later returned to intelligence service with the CIA. In the mid-1990s, McIntosh published *Sisterhood of*

*Spies*, which chronicled many of the women who served in the OSS.

Little did Dorman know back in 1989, but this fast-friendship would also stand the test of time. Over the years, Dr. Dorman and Ms. McIntosh remained in close contact through letters, calls, and visits.

One time, Ms. McIntosh even facilitated an excursion to the CIA museum where Dorman was honored to get Betty's commentary on the OSS gallery. Dorman was particularly moved by the exhibits on CIA contributions to the Global War on Terror—Iraq and Afghanistan, because her husband served in Afghanistan as did a number of her former students. But what made this experience even more personal to her was the fact that one of her former students, Jeremiah Schmunk, died in Iraq in 2004.

Dorman's experience with McIntosh at the CIA museum stayed with her over the years as the women remained in close contact. And when the CIA honored Ms. McIntosh on the occasion of her 100th birthday last year, Dr. Dorman was there to celebrate her life as of one of America's most accomplished spies in our nation's history.

CIA Director John Brennan noted that Betty's "many achievements and storied life are an inspiration to all women and particularly to those of the CIA. It is fitting that Women's History Month begins each year on March 1, the birthday of Betty McIntosh."

"The best part is that the day from beginning to end was a tribute to Betty and her incredible life," said Dorman. "People took time and came from all over the Agency to shake her hand, thank her for her

service, and wish her well. That the Director took time to be there was just perfect. I don't think it occurred to me that I would ever be having lunch with the Director of the CIA!"

Another symbol of friendship that Dorman has treasured over the years is McIntosh's generosity in sharing friends. "Betty is responsible for one of my dearest friendships with Barbara Lauwers Podosky." Podosky "launched one of the most successful psychological operations campaigns of World War II, which resulted in the surrender of more than 600 Czechoslovakian soldiers fighting for the Germans" according to an article in the *Washington Post*. "Any time I had an opportunity I would meet my spy girlfriends in D.C. It was always wonderful to be with either of them but extra special to be with them both," says Dr. Dorman.

Through her research of the intelligence field and friendships with women like Betty and Barbara, Dorman concludes that intelligence is a very important, yet thankless job. "The old saying is 'If they are doing their job, we never know it.' Intelligence is one of the most important safeguards of our democracy."

Dr. Dorman's passions and relationships drove her to write and publish her dissertation—and first book—this past November. *Martha Gellhorn: Myth, Motif and Remembrance* is a text that offers a fresh new look at the legacy of Gellhorn, a 20th-century journalist that was regarded as one of the "preeminent war correspondents of the century"—and one of Ernest Hemingway's many wives.

We encourage members interested in journalism and history to read and use Dr. Dorman's book and to explore the fascinating lives of women war correspondents and spies. ■



**Dr. Dorman** received the 2006 American Star of Teaching Award for Washington state from the U.S. Department of Education

for her work in helping numerous low income and immigrant students to become Gates Millennium Scholars that receive lucrative scholarships and ongoing support from the Gates Foundation. Dr. Dorman is currently working on an untitled bio-pic based on her teaching experience with migrant students, struggles against the system, small town attitudes, and small-minded educators.

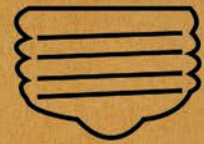
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# End of the Year Wisdom: 12 Inconvenient Truths That Smart People Easily Forget

You're in the homestretch of the school year!  
Hang in there and don't forget these great tips!



**S**ometimes even the smartest people forget some very simple truths. Consider this your reminder. Maybe there really is such a thing as being too smart for your own good. Sometimes the smartest ones among us get lost in overthinking and overdoing and lose track of the basic truths that are helpful in leadership and life.

For those who easily forget some inconvenient truths, here are 12 simple reminders.

## 1. Never confuse education with intelligence.

Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Frank Lloyd Wright were all college dropouts. You can have all the education in the world and do nothing with it—or you can teach yourself from scratch and, with passion and dedication, become massively successful. Use your intelligence to take you where you want to go, by whatever route is best for you.

## 2. Pain can be positive.

Pain is a necessary part of growth and learning; it can teach us many things about ourselves. Today's pain leads to tomorrow's strength, and every challenge you encounter carries with it the opportunity for growth.

## 3. You're the boss of your life.

Even if you work for someone else, even if you're at the bottom of the org chart, you are the CEO—and the CFO and COO—of your life. You are investing in yourself every day with your actions and the things you learn, and you are selling yourself every day with the face you show the world.

## 4. Failure is a stepping stone for success.

Many smart people are terrified of ever making a mistake, but never risking enough to fail is like slow poison. Failure teaches some of the most valuable lessons you'll ever learn, and having the courage to continue leads you to wisdom.

## 5. Low expectations are good protection.

If you set the bar low, you will never be disappointed. Learn to let go and accept rather than expect. Life may just surprise us.

## 6. Problems can start from within.

We all run into a difficult person now and then. However, when you routinely have problems with your partner, colleagues, clients, or spouse, you may need to ask yourself what the real problem is. Maybe we have to look within.

## 7. High standards are worth keeping.

There's always somebody ready to tell you that cutting corners and fudging a little is the only way to get ahead. They're wrong, and someday that wrong thinking will catch up with them. Earn the right to hold others to high standards by meeting them yourself.

## 8. Potential counts for nothing until it's realized.

No one lacks potential, but many lack the will or the skill to convert it to achievement. The main reason people fail to reach their full potential? They're unwilling to take a risk.

## 9. Negativity poisons the soul.

Negativity is like a tsunami: it takes over quickly and destroys everything in its path. When you learn to stay positive, you shut off the drama that is negativity's lifeblood, and you open yourself up for amazing things to happen.

## 10. Success is not the key to happiness.

Instead of aiming to become successful, we should work to become a person of value—that is where the path to happiness lies.

## 11. If you wait until you are ready, you will be waiting for the rest of your life.

It's always tempting to wait: for the right time, for the right project, for the right opportunity, for everything to be perfect. If you want to do anything, plan, prepare—and then take the leap.

## 12. You owe something to the world, not the other way around.

Instead of asking ourselves what we can acquire from the world, we should be asking what we can give. When you do, it changes your perspective. It changes everything.

Be smart, but remember: Smart is good...but knowing the truth is best. ■

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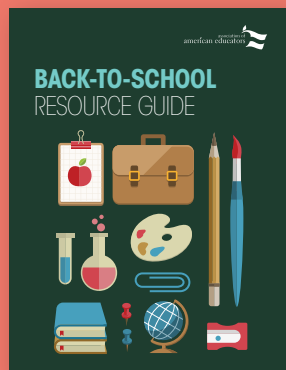


**Lolly Daskal** is founder of Lead from Within, a global leadership, executive coaching, and consulting firm based in New York City.

With more than 30 years of experience with some of the world's largest and most successful companies, Lolly is one of today's most sought-after executive leadership coaches and leadership consultants. Her extensive cross-cultural expertise spans several continents, and most every industry.

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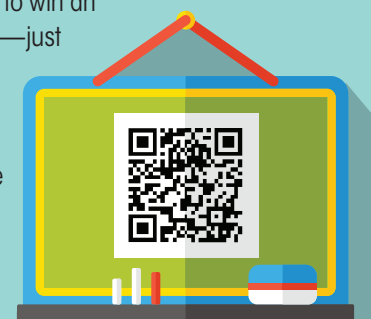
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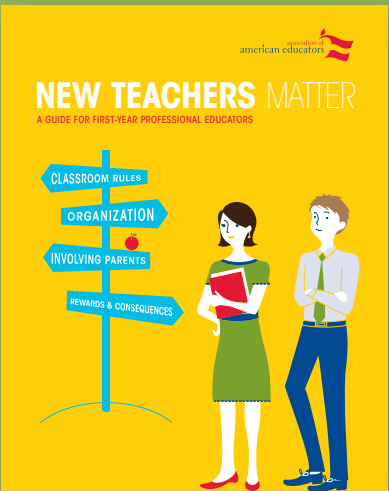
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