**Education Reform Key: Stop Enabling Students' Self-Defeating Behavior**

By [**David Ginsburg**](https://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/coach_gs_teaching_tips/) on February 13, 2011 8:56 PM

People often ask me how we can bring about meaningful, widespread education reform. And though my answer includes several priorities, it always starts with one: every adult in every school must stop enabling students' self-defeating behavior.

In a chapter titled *Unemployment Training: The Ideology of Non-work Learned in Urban Schools* in his book, [***Star Teachers***](https://www.habermanfoundation.org/Book.aspx?sm=c1), Martin Haberman describes in great detail--and accuracy, based on my experience in urban schools the past 18 years--several ways this enabling occurs.

My own experience as an enabler seemed unlikely at first, since I entered teaching with high expectations of students. But when students failed to meet those expectations, I quickly concluded they were incapable of doing so. In turn, I lowered (and lowered and lowered...) my expectations, and enabled (and enabled and enabled...) students' self-defeating behavior. Here are just a few of many ways I did this:

* Giving truant students opportunity after opportunity to turn in make-up work.
* Re-teaching lessons to accommodate students who were absent the day before
* Allowing students to do extra credit to compensate for poor grades on quizzes and tests.
* Backing off on assigning homework because most students weren't doing it.

Eventually I realized that while indulging kids like this can make life easier for teachers (i.e., avoid conflict with students, parents, and administrators), it can never make life better for students. I also realized that my earlier conclusion was wrong. It wasn't that students were *incapable* of meeting high expectations; they were *unprepared* to meet them. Not just in terms of academic skills but also work habits. Organization. Persistence. Dependability. Punctuality. You name it, my students lacked it. So much so that I began targeting their work habit deficits as much as their academic deficits. And whereas I once enabled students' poor work habits, I later helped students develop strong ones.

I'll elaborate in future posts on the work habits I targeted, and how I targeted them. For now, though, I encourage you to reflect on and share your experiences related to one of the biggest obstacles toward meaningful school reform: we as educators enabling self-defeating student behavior.