A SMALL FLOCK OF POEMS FOR EDUCATORS

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www.agi.harvard.edu
www.tripoded.com
www.bostonbasics.org
www.thebasics.org

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TRANSFORMATION

I started kindergarten
Two or three big steps behind.
Some classmates understood things
That had never crossed my mind.

The kids who looked real different
Seemed so smart (I can recall).
Kids who looked and spoke like I did
Didn’t seem so smart at all.

Of course there were exceptions,
But on mostly any day,
It was clear those kids were doing best
And we were just okay.

Our teachers liked them better
‘Cause they always knew the answers,
So kids like me just tried to be
Good athletes and great dancers.

The years went by quite slowly
And most things just stayed the same,
Until our principal decided
It was time to change the game.

She hinted that the reason
When those other kids did best
Was that many knew already
More of what was on the tests.

They learned it from their parents
And from things they did at home.
Much that I and my companions
Never had the chance to know.

That had always been the pattern.
Yes for years it was the same.
But the standards movement came along
To finally change the game.

Now that there’s a new prescription
For the way our school is run,
Everybody’s got new goals to reach.
It’s getting to be fun!

We’re learning to get smarter
‘Cause our teachers show us how.
They’re all serious about it.
Everyone’s important now!

Time in class is so exciting
That we seldom fool around.
We might make a joke in passing,
But we quickly settle down.

After school we do our homework.
Often in our study groups.
When we need them we have tutors
And they give us all the “scoops.”

If there’s something that’s confusing,
It’s a temporary thing
‘Cause the teachers love to answer
All the questions that we bring.

All the counselors and teachers
Work with parents as team
‘Cause they share the same commitment
To connect us with our dreams.

I love the way things are now.
It all just seems so right!
We still play sports and we’re still cool,
But now we’re also “bright.”

That first day of kindergarten
Some of us were way behind.
But today I’m graduating
In a truly different time.

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And Their Children Too
The child who stands before you
Will some day be in your shoes
And a child will stand before her
Hearing things once said by you.
If your message is uplifting
And your smile is bright and true
She will pass them to her children
In the ways she learned from you.

Think
think of the deepest emotions you have –
the feelings that make you explode.
well each of the children you have in your class
carries that same mother load.

what is the role that you play in their lives?
the feelings you daily inspire?
do you nurture ambition and make their eyes wide?
do the things you teach build their desire?

yours is the power to nurture bond fires
that fuel great ambitions and goals.
so endeavor to do all you can to inspire
your students to be great and bold.

there will soon come a day when you’ll look up with pride
and know that you did all you could
when you see them on wings way up high in the sky
’cause you taught them and they understood!!

Persist
There is no greater frustration
than to be stubbornly misunderstood
by a child who is afraid that she can’t learn.
And there is no greater elation
than when the light of understanding
burns away the fear and makes her smile return.

When it’s Over
the lesson ain’t over
’til the skinny kid smiles
and signals that he understands.

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A Brilliant Inspiration!
(Secrets of a recalcitrant student.)

I tried hard to ignore her,
Never looked her in the eye,
But she kept on talking to me
While I tried to act real shy.

I would rather have been playing
Somewhere miles away from her,
But she kept on talking to me
‘bout the grades I had to earn.

I was getting really tired,
Wanted her to go away,
But I could not think of how to make her vanish.

It was after lots of thinking,
I can still recall the day,
That I finally had a brilliant inspiration:

There’d be nothing she could tell me
If did all the assignments
And it might be fun to show how much I knew.

So I focused on my work a while,
Completed all my papers,
Then I raised my hand to tell her I was through.

I think that I surprised her
‘Cause she stood there stunned and speechless
And that’s just what I’d been wanting her to do.

Success!

Sure as Sunlight (to kids)

There’s a classmate in the room here
who may someday cure all cancer
but they’ve got to do their schoolwork
and survive some ridicule.

It’s someone who hasn’t blossomed
so you cannot see their brilliance
but as sure as there is sunlight
they’re here now in your school.

I can’t tell you what their name is
nor their height, nor weight, nor color,
but with your support they’re going to do
some stuff that’s really cool.

Sure as Sunlight (to teachers)

there’s a child here in your caring
who may someday cure all cancer
but you’ve got to lay the groundwork
so that it can come to pass.

she’s a child who hasn’t blossomed
so you cannot see her brilliance
but as sure as there is sunlight
she is here now in your class.

I can’t tell you what her name is
nor her height, nor weight, nor color,
only that she is potentially
a history-making lass.

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How Hard to Push, How Far to Lead

Who can say how hard to push
The children to excel?
You ask, “How hard is hard enough?”
But don’t know how to tell.

Childhood years should overflow
With games and lots of fun.
But time is short and pressure high
For learning to get done.

The state’s new test is coming
And our principal is clear
That our students must be ready
There is a lot to fear.

If the scores don’t reach the threshold
Then the piper we must pay.
So I guess I’ll put the pressure
On my little ones today.

But no! That can’t be the answer!
Pressure crushes and distorts!
There has got to be another way --
One of a kinder sort.

I will take them on a journey
On a road that dips and winds.
When we tire we’ll continue --
Learning things of every kind.

I will help them deeply value
What that journey has to teach.
They’ll excel because I love them
And because of goals they’ll reach.

At the end of our endeavor
When they take the State’s new test
They will know most of the answers
And with smiles they’ll do their best.

No Cause to Yell

If you teach the joy of learning
You may be surprised to find
That the need push and fuss and shout
Will soon be left behind.

When you make that evolution
Deep inside of your own mind,
That will be the day you know
The joy of teaching not the grind.

On that day you will no longer
Have to force them to excel,
For they’ll know the joy of learning
And you’ll never have to yell.

Flearning

We need a magic formula
To make a flearning blend.
So kids will keep on learning
Even when the fun begins.

With flearning it’s amazing
How they run to class and then
Start to grab at books with eagerness
And read with funny grins.

You’ll find this magic formula
Inside of your own heart
Just think of why you’re teaching
And right then the magic starts.

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My Hero

My teacher is my hero.
She’s the captain of our team.
My classmates all adore her.
She taught us all to dream.

It’s a dream of overcoming
All the challenges we’ll face.
She helps us build our confidence—
Prepares us for the race.

It’s a race into the future
To a place we don’t yet know.
We’ve got to be quite versatile—
Prepared for any foe.

My teacher looks for excellence.
She says she’ll take no less.
Now when a challenge faces us
We’ve learned to do our best.

I really love my teacher
And I’m sure that she loves me.
When I get to be a grownup
She’s the kind I want to be.

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**Misguided Love**

I care about my students
More than I can ever say.
When they hug me in the morning
They’re so loving.

Some are very disadvantaged
And their lives are really hard
I’m especially sympathetic
When they’re crying.

I allow them just to watch
Until they’re ready to join in
Then I praise them to the hilt
For simply trying.

Perhaps if I were stricter
They would learn a little more,
But I’m not sure that they can.
So I just love them.

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Is it Really Over?

It’s the end of the semester.  
I don’t know quite how to feel.  
I have finally come to know you,  
   Now you’re leaving.

This is our last day together  
And my sense of loss is real,  
But somehow it isn’t right now  
   To be grieving.

I have given my best effort  
To prepare you to move on,  
So I guess I should be happy  
   That you’re going.

I will just have to accept it  
That next week you will be gone.  
Here’s a wish that your success  
   Is overflowing.

   So long.

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Please, my teacher, open up your . . .

heart to care ever more deeply for us;

mind to think ever more creatively about ways of helping us learn;

mouth to seek fresh ideas and feedback (including from us!); and

classroom to join colleagues and parents in a thriving community where as teachers, parents and children together we strive to reach our potential.

okay?
**My Principal**

My principal is my hero.  
She’s the captain of our team.  
My colleagues all adore her.  
She taught us all to dream.

It’s a dream of overcoming  
All the challenges we face.  
She helps us build our confidence--  
Prepares us for the race.

It’s a race to do the best we can  
To help our students grow.  
They’ve got to be quite versatile --  
Prepared for any foe.

My principal seeks excellence.  
She says she’ll take no less.  
Her firm insistence pushes us  
To do our very best.

I really like our principal  
‘Cause she inspires me.  
As I strive to be a leader  
She’s the kind I’m trying to be.

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Task 3

Ambitiousness versus Ambivalence:
Five short poems about setting goals and planning to do well, or not.

(The Random House dictionary defines “ambivalence” as: 1. uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite things. 2. the coexistence of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object or action.)

Reasons for Ambivalence

1. Not Smart Enough
Sarah thinks that she’s a dummy
So she has no real ambition.
She just hopes that she gets lucky
When the teacher grades exams.

2. No Expected Assistance
Johnny thinks he’d be successful
If he only had a tutor,
But he thinks that’s not an option
So he doesn’t make big plans.

3. No Encouragement
Heather knows that she is smart enough
And yes, she knows as well,
That all the help she needs is right nearby.
But she doesn’t feel encouraged
So she doesn’t feel ambitious.
She just drifts along and doesn’t really try.

4. Boring and Irrelevant
Shantu feels encouraged
And he understands the lessons,
But they’re boring and irrelevant to him.
He says, “To learn them would be useless.”
So, his daily aspiration
Is to make it through until it’s time for gym.

Reasons for Ambitiousness

Gregory used to be like Sarah, Johnny, Heather
and Shantu,
But this year his teachers told him to believe
That his brain is like a muscle
So that if he puts the work in
His high goals will be real possibilities.

Gregory also knows that help
Will always be there if he needs it,
So that even if the work gets really hard,
His ambitions will be justified
And not just idle dreaming
So he plans to try his best to go real far.

Encouragement surrounds him
Since his parents and his teachers
Try in many different ways to let him know
That he’s a very special person
Whose ambitiousness and progress
Make them happier than they could ever show.

Gregory knows that what he’ll learn
Will be important.
And he’s expecting that the process will be fun!
So he’s feeling quite ambitious
Looking forward to his lessons
And to all the great success that is to come.

Let’s do our best to help all children to: (1) feel smart enough to justify setting goals;
(2) anticipate that help will be available if needed; (3) expect continuing positive reinforcement from adults; (4) understand that their studies are relevant to their lives; and (5) expect that time on task will be enjoyable. If we do, more will become ambitious goal setters (and, ultimately, industrious learners) like Gregory in the second column above.

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HARDSHIPS AND DISTRACTIONS

I'm going to have my dinner
At my grandma's house today.
My mom is stayin' late for work
To make some extra pay.

I've got a lot’ a homework
But I'm worried 'bout my mom.
So that makes it hard to concentrate.
My mind feels like a bomb!

I've also got to make sure
That I wash some clothes to wear
And I've got to get the stuff I need
To tame my crazy hair.

And while I'm doin’ that,
I'll use the phone to make some calls
To tell my friends the time and place
For Friday at the mall.

And sometime between now and then
I've got to get some dough($).
'Cause I ain't going to the mall
All destitute and po'.

I know that I should focus
On that test I've got in math,
But my English paper's due soon too.
I need some help real bad!

Some teachers think I just don't care
And some think I'm not tryin'.
I think I'm caught in a trap —
Sometimes I just start cryin'.

But no one ever sees my tears.
'Cause I just show the tough side.
I like to seem real in control —
If not book-smart, then street-wise.

I wish my teachers understood
What it's like to be me.
To see my life the way I do –
The whole complexity.

They'd see how hard it is to keep
So many things in focus.
They'd see how blurry things can get –
How stuff can seem so hopeless.

My teacher said I best be ready
When I take that test in math.
But I ain’t got no help at home.
I never knew my dad.

I want to go to college.
But for that I need good grades.
Based on what my grades are now,
There may not be a way.

I don’t know what I’m gonna do.
I need someone who’s wise
To help me figure out which way to turn –
To empathize.

But let me stop daydreamin’,
'Cause I got a lot to do.
If I don’t start my homework soon,
I never will get through.

If I try and still can’t do it
Then I just won’t hand it in.
But if I don’t try, I’ll never know.
So here goes, I’ll begin.

Everyday I pray
To find someone to guide me and to care.
Is there any chance that you could be
An answer to my prayer?

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Preschool Foundations

The children seem so tiny
As they move about the room.
Still, they’re complicated people --
So much more than we assume.

Each is different from the others.
None the same as all the rest.
So, I strive to understand them
And it puts me to the test.

Kiesha likes to count things backward.
Pedro likes to pull my hair.
Franco marches like a soldier.
Herman stands up in the chairs.

But each in his or her own way
Is curious and growing;
Learning more about the world each day
With new things that they’re knowing.

And my job is to be sure they know
That love is all around
And that I am here to help them learn
New words and smells and sounds.

No one’s job is more important
Than what I do here each day.
Things I teach will shape the future
For these children now at play.

As among the first to teach them
I must build a firm foundation.
‘Cause for all I know, young Kiesha Jones
Will someday lead the nation!

And even if she doesn’t
There’s a lot that is at stake.
God made me her preschool teacher.
That I’m here is no mistake.

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Educator Self-Censorship: “We Won’t Say ‘They Don’t Know.’”
(Response to a group of university-level math educators who refused to talk about what inner-city children tend not to know when they arrive at school.)

There are words we dare not whisper. No, those words we dare not say We’ll declare that some arrive with more But none arrive with less.
For our enemies they listen – Poised to pounce from where they lay. We’ll deny the contradiction. Our semantics at their best!
Therefore we must be quite careful Speaking only foolproof words, But that cannot be the answer.
So bigots cannot misinterpret No, there is a better way:
What they think they heard. We must not allow the bigots To restrict what we can say.
If we hint at any weaknesses For we know that there are differences
Or injuries or hurts, In how students arrive.
Then the critics and the bigots There are differences
Will then use them to assert In what they’ve had to do to just survive.
That the people we are serving Our opponents seek to blame the victim
Are an undeserving lot Giving them the rap
Whose frailties and transgressions Nonetheless we must admit the truth:
Make them all a hopeless blot. There really are some gaps!
So, we mustn’t utter any sound For we know that there are differences
That might be overheard In how students arrive.
By those lurking here among us There are differences
Waiting to distort our words. And the ways we strive to teach them
Must respond with careful hands.
No, instead we will self censor For we know that there are differences
So that nothing that we say In how students arrive.
Can be used against our values Most have loving home relations.
In a wrong or hurtful way. But some nonetheless arrive
Every child for sure has assets -- With larger holes in their foundations.
Never mind that this prevents us If we face this fact directly
From addressing like we could And do what we need to do
All the deficits our work could fill – We can fill those gaps with knowledge
The ways we could do good. To help every child get through.
And, instead of striking out to prove Then the critics and the bigots
That injuries can heal, That we now seem so to fear
We’ll assert that they do not exist -- Will have long since fallen silent --
We’ll say that they aren’t real. May have simply disappeared.
We will say that every child For we know that there are differences
Arrives with knowledge equal value Give yourself a big dope-slap.
And that differences are absent – Know that destiny is on our side --
Or at least that’s what we’ll tell you. We’ll someday close these gaps!

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If I Had a Magic Formula
(I Don’t, but We Do)

If I had a magic formula
To clear up your confusion
I would use it in a heartbeat
But no magic do I have.

I am but a single person
Who has tried his best to teach you
But with limited capacity
To help you understand.

You come to me not knowing
Many things you should have mastered
Long before you ever got here --
Long before this class began.

Thus I’m feeling rather powerless
But will not give up on you --
No, not even if you doubt yourself
Just let me take your hand.

If all of us who care for you
Commit to work together
I have faith that we can pull away
From doubts that hold us back.

If we focus on your progress
And commit to learn together
That might be the magic formula
We never knew we had.

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Maintain the Rhythm

There are folks who pass among us
Moving steady as the tide
Who we daily take for granted
While upon them we rely.

Then there comes a time when slowly
Like the sun that daily sets
That their presence starts to fades away
Though we aren’t ready yet.

That’s the time when we ourselves become
The steady force at hand
That allows those younger than ourselves
To strengthen and to stand.

There’s a rhythm to the universe
That echoes in your school
From the sounds your feet are making
As you too live out the rule.

If you fail to keep the rhythm
There’s no one to take your place.
So be diligent
The time has come for you to set the pace.

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## Where Fools and Experts Hovered

Every year you come the first day back  
With things that you’ve discovered  
When you went to all your conferences  
Where fools and experts hovered.

There together they concocted  
All this brand new stuff to do  
Then they handed you the package  
Wherein you became the fool.

You’re a fool to think I’m waiting  
For your latest great idea  
I’ve developed what I need myself  
It’s perfect. Don’t you fear!

When you see my next year’s test results  
You’ll see just what I mean  
Then you’ll know that you’re superfluous  
And vanish from the scene!

WAIT! I was only kidding.  
Blowing off some excess steam’  
Please come tell me of this year’s idea  
I’m sure it’s quite a scheme!

## Your Courage and Commitment

I love the way you’ve introduced  
The new approach we’re taking.  
I’m really looking forward now  
To what we’re going to do.

I also like the fact that we  
Will all do this together  
And that no one has the right  
To stand aside or be excused.

The plans that you’ve described  
Are so coherent and transparent  
That I really can’t imagine  
We won’t all know what to do.

And the fact that you’ve relieved us  
Of some old and stale commitments  
Means we’ll have the time and energy  
To really see this through.

So, thank you fearless leader  
For your courage and commitment  
We have finally got a way  
To bring real greatness to this school.

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Johnny’s Thirst to Learn

Johnny had a thirst to learn.  
It followed him to school.  
It sought a way to quench itself  
So Johnny’d be no fool.

It followed John from class to class  
Where sometimes it did find  
Great lessons quite superbly taught  
That strengthened Johnny’s mind.

But sometimes behind other doors  
Were classes poorly taught.  
The time spent there a total waste  
Where effort was for naught.

The world cannot afford to leave  
A mind like Johnny’s thirsty  
Please join me in a quest to make  
More classrooms great and worthy.

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Concentration

Dear class I want you all today
To come with me to find
The great untapped potential
Hidden deep inside your minds.

As grownups we have failed
To push you hard enough to build
Your capacity to concentrate
To reap your fullest yield.

There’s a place deep in your consciousness
You’ve probably never been
Where your brain keeps all the records
Of old thoughts and deeds and friends.

When you find the path to get there
You will be amazed to find
That there’s treasure beyond measure
Stored right there in your own minds.

But you’ll never find the pathway
If you fail to join the search
And the first step is to concentrate
To give your brilliance birth.

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Thank You Deborah!
from R. Ferguson, May 25, 2006, on the occasion of your retirement.

It’s not hard to get discouraged
When uncertainty abounds,
When funding just evaporates
And spirits drag the ground.

She took on the Tripod Project
Then with energy and spirit,
Worked to elevate the work
Of every teacher who came near it.

It’s not hard to throw your hands up
Then just turn and look away,
If you’re hearing lots of promises
But nothing quite persuades.

Deborah Bennett’s been a leader
Shown the way to truly serve
So it’s time to pay the tribute
She so richly now deserves.

And it’s not hard to be discouraged
If you’re a person who
Fails to see the great potential
Of the people in your school.

We thank you dearest Deborah,
For your service here to all.
We refuse to be discouraged!
We refuse to take a fall!

It’s not hard to be a cynic
If you’ve never seen the lights
In the eyes of students struggling
To reach their greatest heights.

For the work is too important.
There’s too much that is at stake.
We will keep on pushing forward
Stopping just for breaths to take.

But Deborah Bennett is no cynic
So she’s never gone astray.
She’s just been an inspiration
That’s what ALL her colleagues say.

As we do so we’ll remember
What you modeled for us all:
That through service we inspire
And together we stand tall!

Thank you, Deborah Bennett.

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## They’re So Precious!
### Misguided Love in Elementary School Classrooms

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<th>I care about my students</th>
<th>They seldom persevere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than I can ever say.</td>
<td>So any effort that they make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When they greet me every morning</td>
<td>Is an accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They’re so precious.</td>
<td>Deserving recognition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People say that there are ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To teach them much more than I do,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They are very disadvantaged</td>
<td>But that’s just speculation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And their lives are really hard</td>
<td>Based on intuition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I’m especially sympathetic</td>
<td>If my kids are really smarter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When they’re anxious.</td>
<td>Than I’m treating them to be,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Then there is great untapped potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In their minds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If one needs to take a breather</td>
<td>But all I really know for sure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And their manner is respectful</td>
<td>Is that they’re precious in my sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I accommodate the wish</td>
<td>If I have touched their hearts,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without resistance.</td>
<td>What more is there to find?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t push them to excel</td>
<td>Am I misguided?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because, as we all know too well,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success in school is not the key</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To their existence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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A Poem for Rossi

The problem thing with dreams, my friend,
    Is one can never know
Which from among them might come true
    As living comes and goes.

    If only we could know today
    What futures might unfold,
We’d know which dreams we should pursue
    And which we should let go.

The dream we share in MSAN
    Is a broad and deep agreement
That one’s ancestry or race
    Should have no bearing on achievement.

    There’s a long way still to go
    To make this dream we share come true,
But I value every moment
    I pursue the dream with you.

Let us travel on together
    With our colleagues and our friends
All together staying on this road
    That dips and winds and bends,
‘Til we pass the torch to others
    Or until it comes to pass
That we reach the culmination
    When the dream is true at last.

As I end this poem dear Rossi,
    What I’d really like to say
Is that you’re a special person
    And I’m glad you’ve come my way.

For a commemorative booklet celebrating Rossi Ray Taylor’s leadership of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), June 2007

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I'm Finally a Principal!

I was once a classroom teacher. Now I try to run a school. When I first got the promotion I thought it was really cool.

I knew it would be a challenge, But I thought I was prepared, So I stepped into the job And started pulling out my hair!!!

Some teachers here expected me To carry all their burdens When I gave their burdens back I was a quite unwelcome person.

And some parents thought they had the right To pick their children’s teachers. When they didn’t get their way They said I was an evil creature.

But I never raised my voice And always tried to be respectful Even when I was contending With adults who were neglectful.

No, instead I tried to model What I hope will be the norm When the teachers and the parents Finally help this school reform.

If we’re going to be successful We have got to have a vision Wherein grown-ups join together In a shared and sacred mission.

Anyone who can’t accept it Is quite free to move along And together we’ll rejoice When those who’ve held us back are gone.

For the future is upon us And there is no time to waste As new first graders learn to read And soil their hands with paste.

When we blink they’ll be in high school. There is work to do each year And we’ll show the same commitment To each child who comes through here.

We are here to nurture children In the best way that we can Anyone who shares this purpose I invite to take my hand.

But I will not compromise With those who choose the status quo. I say, “One way or the other, They have got to change, or go.”

Yes sometimes it will be stressful But you’ll see that in the end This will be a school we’re proud of THEN we all can be great friends.

I was once a classroom teacher. Now I try to run a school. Yes, it makes me pull my hair out. Still, I think it’s pretty cool.

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We Don’t Affect Your AYP, But . . .

They say the school would need
More kids like me—that are my color—
Before our test scores made a difference
One way nor the other.

As it is, some folks here just might think
That we’re not worth the bother,
But maybe they could just pretend
That we’re their little brothers.

Even though it may not help you
To achieve your AYP,
I’m really hopin’ hard
That you’ll find time to tutor me.

I don’t talk much in class
And it may seem that I’m just dumb
But if you just help me out
You’ll be amazed when I become
Somebody really quite important
Someone everybody knows
For the problems that I solve
And all the kindness that I show.
Because you see inside this shell
There are the seeds of hidden greatness
And the only thing required
Is that you should find the kindness
In your heart
To help me find a way
To get my greatness out
So the world can reap the harvest
Of the things they’ll learn about.

Yes this quiet kid who struggles
In you school right here today
Holds the key to many futures
If you help him find his way.

True, nurturing my greatness
Won’t affect your AYP.
Still, I’m hopin’ that you’ll help me out
And not give up on me.

Or Tommy either!

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Searching for the Stairs

I grew up pretty sure
That someday I would go to college.
But I tried and college didn’t work for me.

I tried to make it work,
But did so poorly in my studies
That I had to leave the university.

Now I don’t know what to do
And time is passing by so quickly
I despair to contemplate my destiny.

What am I supposed to do
When everybody in my family
Went to college and has got a big degree?

What am I supposed to do
When everybody says that college
Is the only way to get where I should be?

I’m asking you these things
Because I really need to know
If there’s some hope that I can find my own career.

I’m asking you these things
Because they say that you’re somebody
Who can help me push myself and persevere.

Please help me find a way
To keep believing I’m somebody
Other people can respect [pause] instead of fear.

Please help me find a way
To get invited to the party [pause]
Instead of being told to disappear.

I thank you in advance
For helping me to find a pathway
People say that you’re someone who really cares.

I thank you in advance
For letting people in high places know
That kids like me are searching for the stairs.
Soon-to-Be Parents of Black Male Infants

Too often, in America, black + male = high rates of:

- Failure
- Alienation
- Unemployment
- Poverty
- And Imprisonment

What can you do?

You ask this vital question
With your unborn child in mind.
You are soon to have a brand new baby boy.
I’m sure you know already
It won’t be an easy road
To build a life of optimism, hope and joy.

When he’s old enough to seek
Some validation for his blackness
He may face some friends who say he’s acting white.
With your help he will endure
And grow to be so self-assured
That friends become convinced his type of black is right!

Long before he understands it
You can help him learn the language
By narrating almost every move you make.
When you use gestures and impressions
Funny faces and expressions
He’ll be learning every hour he’s awake.

And anytime that strangers call him
Dirty names or racial slurs
Help him know the flaw is theirs and never his.
Teach him to simply turn way
Ignoring everything they say
Not even pausing to acknowledge they exist.

Years will pass then school will start
And every morning he’ll depart
To get the skills he needs to realize his potential.
When classmates tease or teachers scold
Give him a caring hand to hold
Your strong and ever-present love will be essential.

If you are firm and warm and sure
Then day by day he will mature
As he surmounts the many challenges he’ll face.
And you will know you did your part
When like the finest work of art
He will amaze you as he takes his rightful place.

Then later he’ll need your support
When other kids for fun or sport
Demand that he should follow them in doing wrong.
Your love will help him to resist
No matter how hard they insist
And he will build a self that’s resolute and strong.

If you do all this,
If we all do this.

Then someday in America,
black + male will equal:
Excellence
Happiness
Acceptance
Prosperity
And freedom—
Freedom to experience the fullness of life.
My Students Took a Survey

My students took a survey
On the Tripod 7Cs.
They were asked to answer questions
Focused very much on me.

First among the Cs is Caring
And with focused concentration
Students answered how my teaching
Models personalization.

Next the topic is Conferring
For this C among the questions
There are queries asking students
About classroom conversations.

Next the C is Captivation
And the survey seeks to find
If my lessons are so interesting
They stimulate young minds.

Clarify comes next in order
And my students all are asked
Whether when things get confusing
Understanding comes to pass.

Then there is Consolidation
Focused largely on connections
Asking students if we summarize
And catch our misconceptions.

Challenge is the C for whether
When the work gets really tough
I insist they keep on trying
Even though the going’s rough.

This includes demands for rigor
Where to understand things best
I press them hard to concentrate
Despite their sense of stress.

The seventh of the Cs
Concerns the topic of Control
Keeping kids on task and working hard
Achieves results twofold.

Yes, my students answered questions
Focused on the 7Cs
And the answers that they gave
Showed that they really do know me.

Some were things I was aware of
Others, frankly, were surprising
But the truth was there unfettered
And I started analyzing.

I figured out some things
That I have never thought to do
And now each morning that I rise
I cannot wait to get to school!

Yes, my students took a survey
On the Tripod 7Cs.
They were asked to answer questions
Focused very much on me.

At first I was a skeptic
But I now have come to know
That my students’ insights really can
Show me some ways to go!

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Why Be an Educator?  
_or, Love a Child and Save a Life_

I became an educator  
With the noblest of intentions  
I would teach and nurture children  
All as if they were my own.

But I quickly came to learn  
That there were challenges awaiting  
Hurdles higher and more daunting  
Than my mentors had foretold.

At the start of each new school year  
There were students in my classroom  
Lacking skills and basic knowledge  
On which I had planned to build.

So I had to spend the first few months  
Re-teaching basic concepts  
That my students sorely needed  
As foundations for new skills

It was difficult those first years  
To sustain my motivation  
I felt oh so disillusioned  
Many days so unfulfilled.

‘Till one day I came to realize  
That the job had deeper meaning  
Than I’d ever stopped to recognize  
While struggling to keep pace.

The moment came one morning  
When a child I reprimanded  
Stood with wistful resignation  
No expression on her face.

In that moment swelled a feeling  
I can only call commitment  
Just a stubborn resolution  
Not to let this student fail.

I began to speak the things I felt  
To help her know for certain  
That her life was too important  
That she needed to prevail.

I invited her to join me  
Just the two of us together  
To begin a search relentless  
For a purpose or an interest.

She began to ask me questions  
As she struggled there to trust me  
Questions focused on the reasons  
That someone like me might care

I responded that my purpose  
Was to serve and nurture students  
And that helping kids like her succeed  
Is what I live to do.

I explained that she made possible  
My own self realization  
As a person whose life mission  
Is to teach and love and share.

Then before my eyes a light appeared  
As she too found a purpose  
Days no longer dull and pointless  
No more blank and hopeless stare.

Now she understood the reasons  
That her life and learning mattered  
He had found her inspiration  
Such a twinkle in her eye.

She embraced with all her heart  
The quest to someday be a teacher  
So that she like I might someday  
Love some kids and save some lives.

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Hidden Ambitions

There are things I’d tell my teachers
If I only had a chance.
Like the reasons I so often
Seem to drift off in a trance.

What they cannot see by looking
Is that I’m quite insecure.
Even when I’m acting macho
What I’m feeling is unsure.

What they can see is that sometimes
When I should be concentrating
It appears that I’m daydreaming
Or just busy entertaining.

My classmates think I’m smart
But just refuse to buckle down,
That somehow I like my status
As the classroom’s premier clown.

And I’m sure my teachers think
That I’m just goofing off and hopeless.
Even when I’m working hard
They treat me like I’m still unfocused.

Since I act like I don’t care
About my low grades and performance,
No teacher wants to work with me
They all express reluctance.

So I wish I had the courage
When I’m lost and feeling frightened
To let teachers know I want some help
To have my prospects brighten.

If only there was some way
I could make a true confession
That I’m not the clown I seem
I want to master all my lessons.
“Vacant Jobs!” the big sign says.
But nowhere do I see
A way to get myself prepared
So they can hire me.

They told me if I did the work
To graduate high school
I’d be prepared to have success
And life would be real cool.

I wonder why they lied to me.
It really wasn’t fair!
Now here I am alone and broke
And no one seems to care.

All they said was graduate
And that’s just what I did.
I did enough to pass each class
I was a real good kid.

No one ever told me
That I needed to get skills --
That what I learned in school
Could someday help me pay my bills.

All they said was graduate
I thought that was enough.
So now I sit here clueless
Worried ‘bout all kinds of stuff.
Students know! But we’ll never know if we don’t ask!

The teacher pondered daily
On the things that she might do
So that even kids who struggled
Might try hard to do well too.

She thought so hard her head would hurt!
She wanted to do better!
She was tired of being discouraged
At so little student effort.

Then one day the thought occurred
That she could simply ask her students.
Maybe they’d unveil some secrets
That could finally bring some movement.

So quite nervous at the outset
She reached out to seek their help.
She invited their perspectives --
Dared to reach outside herself.

What she learned was that her students
Were quite often insecure.
That they often failed to seek her help
Because they were unsure.

They told her they pretended
That they really didn’t care
Even when in truth they really did
But just felt shy or scared.

It was better to look lazy
Than to risk appearing stupid.
So they usually hid their effort --
When their confidence was muted.

As she listened she decided
That she could not let them fail.
She would join with them in partnership
To help their hopes prevail.

She invited them to tell her
Of some things she could do better,
And she promised that she’d try
To be the best damn teacher ever!

Yes, she let them know she cared enough
To go out of her way --
She would make sure they succeeded
And she’d do it everyday!

She would care, confer and captivate
And clarify as well.
She would work hard to consolidate
And challenge to excel.

With fresh insights and new confidence
Her class became a place
Where both she and all her students
Found success and were engaged.

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On Us They Can Depend

As children we were fortunate
   When every day we found
That the grownups had the answers
   And they always seemed so sound.

When our problems over whelmed us
   Down on childhood boulevard
Our small world was still coherent
   Cause the grownups were in charge.

Now that we’ve become the grownups
   Will the world just fall apart?
   Will our kids at last discover
That we just don’t have the heart?

   No, instead will they be reassured
   As we were way back then –
That the grownups have it covered
   That on us they can depend.

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The One I See

I look into the mirror
And the person that I see
Is a stranger from the future
That I’m someday going to be

He’s a man who’s found his calling
So his days are rich and full—
Every hour full of meaning
Every action purposeful.

And the reason he’s successful
Is that you are here today.
Your commitment is the reason
That I’m going to find my way.

So please know that I am grateful
For things you help me see.
Your the commitment is the reason
That the one I see is me.

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Winners Dance!

Every day I watch these children
So afraid that there’s a chance
Competition will defeat them
If they’re not prepared to dance.

If they think that they can stand aside
Observing others’ moves,
They’ll be on the outside looking in
Shut out and dead broke too!

But if all of us together
Help them learn the moves to make
They will learn the magic rhythms
And begin to levitate.

They will dance because they’re winners
And the spirit that they’ll feel
Will sustain them like the sunlight
On a green and growing field.

They will dance because we told them
They were worthy of the gold
‘Cause we showed ‘em how to “Shake it!” --
And they did what they were told.

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The Essence of Agency

When she thought that she was powerless
She made that thought come true.
When she learned that she could change the world
She made that come true too.

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Teaching and Learning Agency

Teachers
It seemed their lives were pre-ordained.
Like nothing they could do
Could ever change their destinies.
Resources were too few!

Then leaders at our school
Began to place some new demands.
To treat our kids like people
Who could grow to understand.

We made our lessons relevant
But also made kids struggle.
When things were hard to teach
We said our effort must redouble.

Our classes grew more orderly
And little time was wasted.
We focused on repeating
New successes we had tasted.

We grew much more ambitious
As we learned our skills could grow.
That we could help determine
How their futures would unfold.

No longer will they go through life
Not making any plans.
They’ve learned the way it feels
To see their hopes and dreams expand.

We learned to teach them agency
And now the future’s bright.
Because we lit the path
Once-dormant dreams have taken flight.

Students
We thought our lives were pre-ordained.
No goals we could pursue
Could ever change our destinies.
Resources were too few!

Then teachers at our school
Began to place some new demands.
They treated us like students
Who could grow to understand.

They made our lessons relevant
But also made us struggle.
When things were hard to learn
They said our effort must redouble.

Our classes grew more orderly
And little time was wasted.
We focused on repeating
New successes we had tasted.

We grew more conscientious
As we learned our skills could grow.
New skills could help determine
How our futures would unfold.

No longer will we go through life
Not making any plans.
We’ve learned the way it feels
To see our hopes and dreams expand.

Our teachers taught us agency
And now the future’s bright.
Because they lit the path
Once-dormant dreams have taken flight.

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A Basics Community Contract

We should sign a Basics Contract
Wherein when it comes to babies,
We would share an obligation
With no ifs or buts or maybes.

1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress
We could guarantee that parents
Would be rescued from their stress
By supportive friends and neighbors
Helping put their cares to rest.

This includes the types of friendship where
When weary from no sleep,
Every parent finds a trusted soul
Their precious child to keep.

2. Talk, Sing, and Point
We would help each parent come to know
The benefits of talking
And the ways that pointing helps the child
Decipher all their squawking.

3. Count, Group, and Compare
We would post on walls and billboards
Things that little kids could count,
Near some sculptures made for grouping
To compare and climb and mount.

4. Explore through Movement and Play
We would donate games and puzzles
And some toys to use outside.
We’d make sure that every toddler
Has a tricycle to ride.

5. Read and Discuss Stories
And each child would be enthralled
By all the wonders found through reading,
For we’d offer to each family
Any books they might be needing.

Hereby Resolved
If we all embrace this vision
(That means friends and neighbors too),
Parents then will find the bandwidth
To do what they need to do.

Yes, they’ll need to do The Basics,
And by doing your small part,
You will help more parents help their kids
To learn and grow up smart.
If we all resolve to do these things
We’ve learned will be required,
Then each child our efforts benefit
Will be a life inspired!

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Please find related material at www.bostonbasics.org and www.thebasics.org
THE BASICS
1. Maximize Love, Manage Stress
2. Talk, Sing and Point
3. Count, Group and Compare
4. Explore through Movement and Play
5. Read and Discuss Stories

The Basics Caregiver Promise

With my heart I will love you
And shield you from stress.
With my mouth I will speak what I feel.
With soft words and sweet songs every time I behold you
I’ll show you that my love is real.

With my fingers I’ll point at the objects I name
And I’ll count them in groups to compare.
With my feet I will take you outdoors to explore
While we play and enjoy the fresh air.

With my eyes I will read as I show you the world
Through bright pictures and stories in books.
These are ways to make sure that your brain is prepared
For successes wherever you look.

This my promise I make from the day of your birth
That these basics I’ll faithfully do.
For my job is to help you grow happy and smart
Starting now when your life is brand new.

You will learn that your life is an artwork.
And that you are the artist in charge.
But before you decide what to do with your life
Listen now
To the beat
Of my heart.

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