

*"80 percent of success is showing up"* —Woody Allen

I like quotes. Part of it is that I just really like words. (Making me a verbophile which probably takes things one step too far.) But quotes, the best ones anyway, are like poems: they provide a large, complicated, meaningful message in a tiny, simple package.

I've never been much of a Woody Allen fan and I find certain parts of his personal life revolting, but he hit the nail on the head with this sentiment. I pluck this quote out of my cranial quote vault with people who want things but won't do what they need to in order to get them. They don't show up. I use this quote on myself when I'm feeling a lack of some life attainment that I really want, asking myself if I've really shown up or just thrown in the towel before the first bell has even been rung. It's surprising how often we give up before ever stepping in the ring.

The quote is one I don't use much with students who aren't attending school sufficiently regularly but I do go with the sentiment nonetheless. (The quote can too easily be construed as insulting and getting people to change their behavior is rarely assisted by an upfront affront.) Students who don't show up on a regular basis are unlikely to be successful in school. Then begins a vicious cycle. We are doing poorly or just more poorly than we really should and so we dislike school. Since we dislike school, we avoid it. When we avoid it, our performance drops even more. The solution, the means for breaking the cycle, is going to school each and every day even when we don't feel like it just like we go to a job each and every day even when it doesn't pay enough or requires us to work with unpleasant people or requires more work than can reasonably be accomplished, etc.

Over the last two years, you may have seen a greater focus on going to school on a regular basis. This is a bit odd since, of course, it has always been true that succeeding in school requires the student to show up day after day after day. So why the increased focus now? Why has even our Governor lent his voice to the initiative to improve student attendance?

There are, in fact, several reasons. The first is the Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal law which followed and replaced No Child Left Behind. NCLB focused pretty much exclusively on outcomes—student achievement. Some deemed this too narrow (and possibly too accountable) and so wanted process goals—evidence of things which *lead* to student achievement--added to the new law. One such is student attendance. Thus, schools are now judged, at grades K-8 at least, on their level of student attendance as this figures into their 'score,' the School Performance Index.

A second reason is the recent South Dakota initiative on juvenile justice reform. It was noted that South Dakota had the highest or near highest rates of incarceration of juveniles per capita of any state. This, it was posited, led to higher rates of recidivism. It was also very expensive. Thus, new methods were sought for dealing with juveniles and one factor that figured very much into this new process was getting kids who were struggling in various aspects of their life back into school on a regular basis. Thus, student attendance became a renewed focus.

Finally, attendance became a focal point for the simple reason that it was seen as being on the decline. More students from populations with traditionally poorer student attendance, more extracurricular programs or just longer seasons for existing programs pulling students out of school both by school and clubs, a social trend away from consistent attendance at anything (service groups, church services, even physical shopping) other than one's cell phone, and even higher student expectations for being engaged or even entertained through school lessons, have all led to a drop-off in both the perceived importance of and attendance at school.

And so we—from the Governor's office to the captain's chair at the family dinner table, from the classroom to the principal's office, from police to the courts—have all joined in a chorus with one refrain. That refrain used to be 'stay in school.' Now it is also 'get to school.'

And though I suppose it is just another example of human nature or our fallen nature, it still puzzles me as to why all of this effort is really even necessary. For it really should come down to just one simple reality: You can't succeed if you don't show up.