

Chicken Soup

for

Friendswood ISD

On this particular day, the situation was chaos - a girl was crying in the hallway, a boy was shouting words not usually allowed in school, a group of several students were begrudgingly heading down to the counseling center to change their schedule, and the remaining classroom of students were planning a protest. It was chaos and it was PERFECT!

But let me start from the beginning... In our combined English III and US History class, Corey Truman and I spend the beginning of the school year teaching about people in our past who have used protest and the power of their voice to stand up against injustice. One day, the injustice we discussed was the 1960 Alabama Literacy Test. We emphasized how there were laws that allowed African Americans to vote, but how some states created loopholes to keep them from voting. One of those loopholes being a “literacy test” they would have to pass to be able to vote. The questions were ridiculously difficult because the whole purpose was for African Americans to fail... to keep them from getting what they, by law and humanity, were entitled. We discussed this in class, but the students didn’t FEEL angry or invested in any way. To them, it was still simply something that happened in the past.

So the next day, we gave THEM this same “literacy test.” We may have told a little fib to get them emotionally involved. In fact, we had an administrator come in to tell them that because our class was a “pilot class,” administration needed proof that the students were actually learning what they needed to know. Of course, my co-teacher and I played along, acting frustrated, upset, and angry that they would “unknowingly” spring this type of test on us. The students were obviously angry, as well, but once they saw the questions on the test, they were even more upset. They knew that they were not going to do well and they were afraid of what that would mean. After we went over the scores and told them that the consequences for failure would be removal from the class, there was complete chaos!

Students who failed were sent into the hallway and were met by the administrators who told them what was really going on, but back in the classroom, we allowed the students to think that their peers were being punished for something that was out of their control. They could imagine their “former” classmates being escorted down to the counselors to be removed from the class. They believed without question their friends were being treated unfairly.

THIS IS WHEN THE MAGIC HAPPENED. The remaining students began to plan and scheme, discussing how they would protest this injustice. These students, the ones who passed the test, didn’t care that they passed if it meant that their classmates would be treated unfairly. In that moment of empathy, they were taught that life is bigger than our own individual experiences.

This moment (and many others) is what motivates me to teach. When the students were willing to fight for their rights and, more importantly, the rights of others, they were able to TRULY understand, even for just a moment, what it would have FELT like to be treated differently for something that was out of their control. Life is not always pretty and perfect and predictable. It is not always something we can get from a textbook or study for. So when we are able to bring the emotion into the classroom, we create bonds that exceed anything we actually plan for. It is the emotional connection that makes learning real and authentic.

- Melissa Stephenson, FHS Teacher