August, 2018

Dear Parent or Guardian of an AP English Student,

I am a parent as well. I can’t imagine how you made it. My daughters are in middle school, and I am already exhausted, and humbled by the experience of raising children. Your children are nearly adults, making plans for their futures whether those plans involve going to college or not. When I started teaching, I was told that if I liked children, I should teach in elementary school, and that if I liked my subject area, I should teach in high school. To figure this out, I started teaching in a junior high school, and this is what I discovered about myself:

I was a better teacher to the ninth graders than to the seventh graders. After four years teaching in a junior high school in Los Angeles, I returned home to Marin, and took the teaching job I currently hold at Tamalpais High School. With regards to the courses and books I get to teach, I have never looked back. But I also discovered that I am sympathetic to the young if they are willing to engage me in the most adult manner they can muster, and make an effort to move in the direction of being more responsible, more engaged in the academic life, a life often of books. As I sometimes say to students, I love talking about stories, poetry, language and writing with young adults.

So where am I going with this? I will be a compassionate and demanding teacher. I also fear that schools as institutions, and I as a teacher, have fostered a culture of not challenging students enough, grade inflation, entitlement, not holding students to the expectation that they will behave responsibly, resiliently, and so on.

I am no longer surprised when a parent meets me on back-to-school night and says, “My son is in your class, he hates to read, and never does.” (“But it is an AP elective,” I say.)

I am no longer surprised at the number of students who expect to turn in half of the semester’s assignments during finals week, who believe they should get full credit for work that obviously came with little reflection and little practice.

Or the senior who doesn’t have a pen, or paper for class, and doesn’t know where her book is. Or the students who missed 20 days during the semester, were late many others, and want me to figure out what they need to do so they can get “A”s. Or the student who didn’t know he had homework. Or the young woman who took an extended vacation, or the student who’s mother called the school to say she was sick so he could finish a project for another class, or recover from a late night drama production, or journalism deadline, sporting event, concert, fieldtrip (yes, I have had students claim they were too tired after a field trip to do their homework or to come to class).

Though I try to resist foolishness, to not to be fooled, more often than not, I believe I have been played the fool.

After 29 years of teaching, my empathy and compassion bones are worn, inflamed and arthritic. I am trying to save what is left of them, what little movement is left in that joint.

I want to use my empathy for students with real struggles, real tragedies. I empathize with students who are struggling with academic concepts (I was a terrible high school student and nearly failed to graduate). My compassion goes to the student who is making an effort with this course’s material despite the pains and lessons of life. I hope you understand what I mean.

I could use your help. Here’s how:

* This course demands a lot of reading. Students need to improve their reading skills (and writing skills) for college, work and life. I believe reading often, for extended periods of time is the best practice. Please make sure your student blocks out lots of time to read. (They will have an idea in a few days how fast they read and how much time they will need.) If possible, get the phone away from them while they read. (I know how hard that fight is, but it is one worth having.) Reading, especially in this course, is the foundation of good grades. The readings will be posted on my website, MrBah.com, and if your student says they have finished their homework, have them re-read or read ahead.
* I know there are necessary appointments and legitimate absences, but encourage your student not to miss class. When possible, schedule around class. Be cognizant that students should work ahead in anticipation of trips (even school sponsored), and they can turn in work electronically if necessary.
* Don’t call or text your student in class (some parents do), except for real emergencies, or instruct your student to check messages only after class. Office staff is pretty good about delivering a message to a student in a few minutes, and even assisting a student to leave campus in emergencies. Phones will likely be off during class anyway.
* Make sure your student is well supplied, and understands the importance of coming to class with homework done and materials ready. (Email the student’s counselor, or me if you need assistance with obtaining materials for school.)
* Encourage your student to be on time.

I am going to do my best to curtail behaviors that cause students to fall behind, develop poor academic behaviors, and poor life/professional behaviors.

I am going to do my best to encourage the development of strong academic, life and professional behaviors.

A colleague just walked in and reminded me that most of my students “love me.” And I realize that I love them too. I just don’t want to love them to death (mine). So I sign off with a paradox (was it once a an oxymoron?)

Tough Love,

Mr. Bah

Advanced Placement English Teacher

Please sign and tear off this slip to acknowledge that your student brought to you

* this letter,
* that your student told you about, maybe went over with you, “Letter to Students Regarding This Class and Expectations,”
* “Student Acknowledgement of Expectations, a Student Contract”
* and the “syllabus” for the course.

STUDENT’S NAME PRINTED/ PERIOD / PARENT OF GUARDIAN’S NAME PRINTED / PARENT GUARDIAN SIGNATURE

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