

Want Successful Classroom Experiences? Learn this Innovative Technique

Dr. Deborah Bergeron: Happy almost end of summer, Head Start. I hope summer has been good to you. Here in the DC area, we're feeling every degree of summer. I think it's supposed to hit 100 tomorrow. But nevertheless, it's been a great summer. Lots of traveling and getting to meet some of you folks out there. And we're going to do this August vlog in honor of sort of a back to school theme in a way.

But we're going to start with our Love Note. And so, this month's Love Note goes out to Salt River Head Start, In the Salt River Public Schools in Arizona. I had the absolute privilege to visit them back in June. And what a beautiful facility and wonderful people. In fact, their director showed me her certificate. She was in Head Start, and her mother saved her graduation certificate from 1965. So, that was pretty special. Way to go, Salt — Salt Lake River.

And this month, I thought we would do a sort of back to school, re-energizing sort of theme. I have something I want to share with you that's just sort of a personal or professional philosophy that I kind of share with folks as I've had different jobs in different schools, and here at Head Start — here in the Office of Head Start. And it's just sort of this way of thinking about things that you might want to think about and maybe share with your own staff.

I used it to build a whole school culture when I was leading buildings. And it's an acronym called ARFF, and ARFF stands for Achievement, Respect, Freedom, and Fun. And the idea is that if those four things are fairly balanced in a person's life or in an organization's life, things run really well. And think about it for a minute. Achievement. We all need to feel like we're achieving, and that we're successful. And you can see this so blatantly with children. Children will do whatever they need to do to feel successful. So, if the work at hand isn't making them feel that way, they'll do something over here that makes them feel that way, and sometimes that's a distraction, but it's fulfilling that need for achievement.

We all need to feel respected and loved. I think that's a pretty basic human need. And we like to have choice. Human beings like to feel like they have options and, when you have choice and you're making your own decisions, even if it's within a boundary, there's a certain fulfillment there. And then finally, we all like to have a little fun. So, if you think about that, you can think about it from a personal standpoint, Just in your own personal life, making sure you have achievement and respect, and freedom and fun in your professional and personal life. But then think about it in your organization. And you can do that at a staff level, or you can even charge your teachers with doing that at a classroom level where children are feeling ARFF every day. Where they're feeling like they're getting all of those needs met.

So, I thought I'd just go through this with you, it's sort of like what would it mean for teachers, for example? So, during preservice, you might run a session on ARFF where folks are checking, is content relevant and rigorous? Do they feel achievement when they finish a session during your preservice? Are teachers feeling like they didn't just come back for a new year but you've given them some experience during pre-service that stretched their professional development?

Teachers want to feel that just as much as anybody. Are they feeling respected? You know, when managing adults, there are different ways to demonstrate that, one is certainly through language and tone and folks feeling cared about, but also, just resetting high standards and creating really strong dialog around that.

Adults want to feel like they're being held to a high standard and that they're accountable for it in a way, though, that is respectful and, appreciates their professionalism. Are they getting choice? Is there freedom within their professional world? Giving teachers choice, you can do that in a number of different ways, is very invigorating and it gives them a sense of professionalism and that just feels good.

And then finally, you gotta make that pre service fun. There has to be a little bit of fun involved. And re-energize the staff. Throughout the school year, what might this look like for you? Support leads to achievement, so that would be where the support you're giving your teachers is leading to their growth and development, teachers love to feel supported and like they're on a trajectory of growth. Are they respected? That would be true in language, in policies, in how adults treat each other, how children treat each other within a program. And how teachers treat children, I think that's holistic and I think in general, throughout Head Start I see fairly respectful environments but pay special attention to it and you might want to look for details that show respect.

And I'll give you one example of my own, this is just a personal thing within my own professional environment to show respect. I would avoid signs that told children, or even adults not to do something. So, for example, you wouldn't put "no running in the hallway" or something like that. We would put what we wanted children to do, so we would say use your walking feet. And those kinds of differences, they're nuanced but they make a big difference. What does ARFF mean for parents? Parents need to feel achievement too and the beauty of Head Start is that it's our job to support them and getting them to feel successful as a parent, they want their children to thrive, they need to be thriving themselves so they're a good example. So, when you support parent achievement, you're kind of fulfilling that part of their own ARFF. Do parents feel welcome? And do they feel part of the solution in your environment? Is it an honest environment.

Those are all things that will show respect. And I even think that respect and love can be used sort of interchangeably, I think parents, they do need to feel a certain sense of love from the environment that takes care of their children, I think that's important. And do they feel like they have choice and some freedom in the process to participate? In other words, you're giving them opportunities to participate that are vast so they can pick the ones that make sense for them. All parents are different, they have different demands, and so by giving them some opportunities to choose, you're kind of invigorating that piece of ARFF.

And then finally, as with anything, it's gotta be a little bit of fun. So, you add some fun to that and you've got this great ingredient for parent engagement. And then what does it mean for children? Well, children have to feel achievement. This is something that, in a very organic way, you can see evolve if you just put a group of children on the mat and they're playing with various toys or whatever. You're going to see them gravitate to the things that give them that sense of achievement. And I think that's why a lot of times when what we're putting in front of

them as teachers might be too difficult, they will look for something that gives them that sense of achievement.

And sometimes that's in the form of misbehavior, what we see as misbehavior, but what they might see as real achievement, so. Giving children the opportunity to feel successful is really important. And that includes behavior. So, if a child is struggling with coming to the rug and sitting quietly, like, working with them on that skill, so that they can feel like they have learned how to do that and they're supported in the process, is achievement, as well. It doesn't have to just be academics. Do children feel loved and respected?

Again, I think those can be kind of interchangeable and that's going to come with language we use, tone of voice, body language. Certainly, yelling at children is not a way of showing respect. Kind voices that invoke in them the opportunity to be successful is really important. And sometimes that's challenging because the day's long, we get tired, we're just people. And so, if you think about this from a leadership standpoint, making sure you're supporting your teachers so that they can be present for their children and that they can always be engaged in a respectful way. We all need to make sure we take breaks where we need them and part of leadership is recognizing that, as well. And children need to have freedom to choose.

The wonderful thing about a center environment is they can gravitate toward what is intriguing at the moment and what they're choosing to do. And we do a lot of that in Head Start, I love seeing those options for children. And then finally, they gotta have some fun. And it can just be for fun's sake, you know? Sometimes it's a Tuesday and we just need to celebrate. I mean, Tuesdays are awesome! So, those are ways that you can share ARFF with children.

So, that's just a little insight into a piece of what I call high trust, it's a program that — I was trained on early, early on and I pick from it now and again and I think it's got a lot of general applications so if that's something that helps you, just thought it'd be fun to share, it's back to school time, it's time to start thinking about the new year and what we can do that's new and different. And maybe that's something you want to delve into. And then we're going to end up today, if you didn't know already, I was thinking about this the other day as I was navigating some different sites of programs. I want to remind you, I think you know this, but I'm going to remind you, you can put the Head Start logo on all of your information.

So, websites, brochures, flyers, business cards, I hope you're doing that. I do think it's important as a national community that Head Start is represented in the community. If, in fact, Head Start is part of a particular program. One of the things that I've been working on here at central office is talking about how we can better promote Head Start in a general sense. Well that's going to start with you on the ground.

So, if we look at your website, and you offer Head Start services, but there's no little Head Start blocks on there, we need to get them on there. So, that that logo is present and that you're promoting the fact that Head Start lives in your building.

So, I'd like to encourage you to do that if you're not already. And to just look at all of your marketing, whether it's social media, hard marketing, paper, flyers, things like that, website, whatever it is, just to make sure Head Start is front and center.

So, again, I hope you're gearing up for a really great back to school and pre-service with your teachers, and don't forget, Head Start is access to the American Dream. Go make dreams happen.