

## Gear Document 2

<http://www.teachingquality.org/content/students-need-good-pencil>

Posted by [Dave Orphal](#) on Thursday, 01/10/2013

*Over December, my students at Skyline High School in Oakland worked on four school-reform proposals. This project is the child of summer work that my colleagues and I did with the [Buck Institute](#) for Project Based Learning and my recent trip to Finland.*

*While I was halfway across the world, talking with Finnish educators, my students were studying the Finnish education system and comparing that world-leading education to their own. After identifying numerous places where our school could improve, each of my two Introduction to Education classes chose two topics to dive deep into. Introduction to Education is a tenth grade class for students who think they might want to enter the education field as a career. These students then take Educational Psychology in their junior year, and cap their experience with Peer Education as seniors. This is the second of those four posts.*

### Students need a good pencil

This is a problem in classrooms across the nation. Sometimes, kids are kids and kids forget to bring their supplies to class. In other classrooms, like mine, the problem goes deeper.

My students on the Classroom Supplies team shared stories about their annual dread in coming back to school. After the first day, they told me, they would go home with a long list of supplies that they would need in each class. They might need as many as six binder, each costing about \$7. They would need binder paper, another \$4. Pens, pencils, rulers, a calculator, highlighters, colored pencils or pens for art; with each item, they saw a

mounting total in their minds. Some of my students would hide these lists from their parents, already knowing that the family budget couldn't handle the stress, but also knowing that their parents would try to make it work.

It felt embarrassing, some of my students confessed. Just like that, on the first day of school, they felt poor, embarrassed, and stressed. These are definitely not the feelings with which any teacher wants to burden her students.

### Emotions are important to learning

Before getting into any of the vast research on emotions' link to learning (which you can look at [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)) my students could tell me how their whole bodies and minds would shut down once they looked at their shopping lists on the first day. They also told me how these feelings would revisit each and every time they raised their hands and asked, "Can I have a pencil?"

Regardless of the response of the teacher, my children's learning was already damaged when they raised their hands. If the teacher reacted negatively, the damage got worse. "Sometimes, a teacher might even yell at you," one student told her team. "I was in this class, and the teacher got really upset that one of the kids needed a pencil. He was shouting at the kid about not being prepared, and asking really rude questions about why he had forgot his pencil and didn't he know better." Even though my student wasn't the target of this teachers outburst, she felt herself mentally shutting down. "Everyone was embarrassed. Even though I knew that the teacher wasn't yelling at me, I still felt bad. I just kept my head down and took my notes that class, but I don't remember anything I was supposed to learn that day."

I'm not upset at the teacher in the above story for losing his temper. Don't get me wrong, I think he handled that situation poorly, but I understand where the frustration comes from.

The average teacher spends about \$500 of her own money buying basic supplies for her classroom. I'm better/worse than most. I spend about \$800

each year on pencils and pens and paper and binders and, and, and... I get frustrated at my school for not supplying me with these basic tools of our trade. I get frustrated at my city and state for continuing to underfund public education. I know this isn't reasonable, but I take it personally, as if I know that my principal, superintendent, and state board of education are counting on me to fill this gap. This creates a lot of stress.

For my colleagues with fewer years in the classroom, the stress can be even greater. Feeling compelled to make a \$500 investment in her classroom, buying supplies that she knows the school should simply provide, can be especially hard on a new teacher who is only bringing home about \$2000 each month.

I know teachers who spend hours on the computer, hustling after grants and promoting their projects on donorschoose.org. Even when these teachers win their grant, they've invested so much time panhandling for their students, that some wonder if they just should have spent the money out of pocket in the first place.

### So, what's a school to do?

My students want each of their teachers to have a \$500 classroom supplies budget. They want each teacher to be able to run out to the store and get the pencils and pens her class needs without worrying about how to pay for it.

To find this money, my students want to do two things. First, they want to be a part of a team with their teachers and the principal to go over the budget. They think their perspective can help the grown ups at the school make better decisions about how to spend money. They ask, "Is the school spending money on things that we really don't need?" To be honest, I didn't have an answer for them.

Second, they wanted to create a class in which a part of the curriculum would be fundraising for the school. They think it could be linked with our leadership and school governance classes, as another elective. In that class, the kids could learn how to write grant proposals and promote all of the Donors

Choose proposals for the school. The kids would get valuable non-profit office skills, and the teachers would be relieved of some of the burden of finding money for their classes.

In the mean time, I keep buying supplies for my class. Christmas is over, and Santa helped. Every year, I get pens, pencils, erasers, and small plastic sharpeners in my carefully-hung stocking. "Santa" knows that my classes have been very good this past year, and that our school's supply cupboard looks a lot like Old Mother Hubbard's. While I wish I didn't need to rely on my own pocket or Santa's largess to provide my children with basic supplies, until my school adopts this team's recommendations, we'll just have to get by.