

# WHAT STUDENTS REALLY NEED TO HEAR It's

4 a.m. I've struggled for the last hour to go to sleep. But, I can't. Yet again, I am tossing and turning, unable to shut down my brain. Why? Because I am stressed about my students. Really stressed. I'm so stressed that I can only think to write down what I really want to say — the real truth I've been needing to say — and vow to myself that I will let my students hear what I *really* think tomorrow.

This is what students really need to hear:

First, you need to know right now that I care about you. In fact, I care about you more than you may care about yourself. And I care not just about your grades or your test scores, but about you as a person. And, because I care, I need to be honest with you. Do I have permission to be honest with you — both in what I say and how I say it?

Here's the thing: I lose sleep because of you. Every week.

Before I tell you why, you should understand the truth about school. You see, the main event of school is not academic learning. It never has been. It never will be. And, if you find someone who is passionate in claiming that it *is* about academics, that person is lying to himself or herself and may genuinely believe that lie. Yes, algebra, essay writing, Spanish, the judicial process — all are important and worth knowing. But they are not the MAIN event.

The main event is learning how to deal with the harshness of life when it gets difficult — how to overcome problems as simple as a forgotten locker combination, to obnoxious peers, to gossip, to people doubting you, to asking for help in the face of self-doubt, to pushing yourself to concentrate when a million other thoughts and temptations are fingertips away.

It is your resilience in conquering the main event — adversity — that truly prepares you for life after school. Because, mark my words, school is not the most challenging time you will have in life. You will face far greater challenges than these. Sure, you will have times more amazing than you can imagine, but you will also confront incomparable tragedy, frustration, and fear in the years to come.

But, you shouldn't be worried about the fact that you will face great adversities. You should be worried because you're setting yourself up to fail at overcoming them. Here's the real reason I lose hours of sleep worrying about you: You are failing the main event of school. You are quitting. You may not think you are quitting, but you are because quitting wears many masks.

For some, you quit by throwing the day away and not even trying to write a sentence or a fraction because you think it doesn't matter or you can't or there's no point. But it does. What you write is not the main event. The fact that you

do take charge of your own fear and doubt *in order* to write when you are challenged — THAT is the main event. Some of you quit by skipping class on your free education. Being punctual to fit the mold of the classroom is not the main event of showing up. The main event is delaying your temptation and investing in your own intelligence — understanding that sometimes short-term pain creates long-term gain and that great people make sacrifices for a greater good.

For others, you quit by being rude and disrespectful to adults in the hallway who ask you to come to class. Bowing to authority is not the main event. The main event is learning how to problem solve maturely, not letting your judgement be tainted by the stains of emotion.

I see some of you quit by choosing not to take opportunities to work harder and pass a class, no matter how far down you are. The main event is not getting a number to tell you you are worthy. The main event is pulling your crap together and making hard choices and sacrifices when things seem impossible. It is finding hope in the hopeless, courage in the chasm, guts in the grave.

What you need to see is that every time you take the easy way out, you are building a habit of quitting. And it will destroy your future and it will annihilate your happiness if you let it. Our society cares nothing for quitters. Life will let you die alone, depressed, and poor if you can't man or woman up enough to deal with hardship. You are either the muscle or the dirt. You either take resistance and grow stronger or blow in the wind and erode.

As long as you are in my life, I am not going to let quitting be easy for you. I am going to challenge you, confront you, push you, and coach you. You can whine. You can throw a tantrum. You can shout and swear and stomp and cry. And the next day, guess what? I will be here waiting — smiling and patient — to give you a fresh start. Because you are worth it.

So, do yourself a favor: Step up. No more excuses. No more justifications. No blaming. No quitting. Just pick your head up. Rip the cords out of your ears. Grab the frickin' pencil and let's do this.

– C. Mielke