

## **On Teaching and Education: Jason Kamras, 2005 National Teacher of the Year**

Video transcript, from an interview by Milton Chen

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### **PART TWO**

#### **Grading American Public Schools**

As a nation, I think the United States has some very positive aspects about its public education system, and I think it also has some very negative aspects about it. I think we need to be honest about that. I think there are many communities that are doing a wonderful job of educating children in America, and I've met extraordinary educators all over this country doing incredible work, and that's very uplifting to me.

At the same time, we're a country of inequities, and there are many, many communities all across America where students of particular socioeconomic backgrounds are not being served adequately, quite frankly. And that has resulted in huge gaps in achievement, based on class, and race, and language of origin, and so one of my particular passions is raising awareness about these gaps and really galvanizing support for policies and mechanisms to help close these gaps. I think that one of the most important things we can do as a country is help eliminate these inequities.

#### **Ideas for Policy Changes**

The most important thing we can do is invest in human capital. What do I mean? Really, make an effort as a nation to attract and recruit the very best that our country has to offer in terms of its young people to serve as teachers and as school leaders in low-income, urban, and rural communities throughout the country. We could offer some significant financial incentives to help bring our bright young people into schools that desperately need them.

For example, the federal government offers about \$17,500 of loan forgiveness for individuals who teach in low-income schools for five years. I think that's great. But if you're coming out of a private school, with close to \$200,000 in debt, \$17,500 isn't quite enough — particularly if you're a math or science major, where the opportunities in the private sector are so great. And so I would love to see a national program that offers full scholarships to any American student who graduates from college and wants to teach at an underserved school system — say, for five years.

### **Preparing Teachers to Teach**

The preparation of teachers is so important, and it has received a lot of discussion, and schools of education are going through a lot of transformation at this time. There's a lot of questions about, "What should teacher preparation be?" And I think, first of all, the most important thing is that teachers have strong content knowledge — throughout K-12, not just in middle school and high school. Sometimes, you'll find elementary teachers without a strong foundation in mathematics, which can be very troubling for students if they're not getting a really solid foundation in mathematics in the early grades.

What I've found is, the best way I've improved as a teacher is by observing other great teachers, or videotaping myself, and then having other people provide constructive feedback. And so I'd like to see preparation be, number one, content based, content focused, and, number two, have a much larger in-class [component] — not sitting in a lecture class, but a teaching component, a practical component.

### **Classroom Management**

Classroom management is obviously a huge challenge for many beginning teachers, and for many teachers throughout their careers. A couple things I would say about that: Number one, the best classroom-management technique I can tell someone is to have a really great engaging lesson.

Having a wonderful lesson can take care of so many of the management difficulties that you face, but beyond that, I think it's really important to have a clear set of expectations for your students. Make sure that they understand them. It's not enough for you to have them; you have to teach them to your students, and then have an accountability system for them.

What happens if they don't meet those expectations? [Such a system must be] very clearly delineated for them; at my school, we use the demerit system, and there are consequences for each demerit that a student receives. And we teach the system just like we would an academic subject: We test them on it so that they know it and they can recite it back to you, and then we enforce it, very consistently and very rigorously. That would be the second thing I would say.

The third thing is, don't forget to emphasize the positive. There's great power in highlighting the positive behaviors and positive efforts of students. For example, you're trying to get a group of seventh graders to line up to go to lunch. And there are three of them who are straggling, and there's a class of thirty students. You could spend a lot of time calling out those three students. Or, you could thank each of the students who are already in line. And I guarantee you, if you thank the ones who are already in line, those three will get in line much more quickly than if you called them out for not being in line.

I really try to emphasize on my team, and with new teachers, the power of that positive feedback. For example, one of the things I do in class as a reward — I don't give out candy or goodies or anything like that — is, I will pull out my cell phone in the middle of class and call a parent at work or at home to tell that mother or father about the great thing that their child did in class right there. And I have to tell you, that is the most sought-after reward that I could ever offer. Students are out-of-their-mind excited to have me call their parent at work.

### **The Benefits of School Uniforms**

There's been a lot of discussion about uniforms, and their impact on school culture, and what I have found — we don't have uniforms at the school — but when I have spoken with teachers and administrators and students at schools with uniforms, the story usually goes like this: Initially, there's some resistance toward it, but then afterward it creates a very positive professional culture in the school, which reflects everything we're trying to do in the classroom. And I have found that when I walk into a school with uniforms — young men are wearing ties, and everybody dressed very professionally — it creates an environment which is very professional and businesslike, and you know students are there for the business of learning.

I think that's a great thing, particularly in schools and school systems which often have had low expectations for children, where children have been allowed to dress inappropriately or to not be very professional about the work of learning. And there's an added benefit in low-income school systems, and that is that it can help level the playing field in a way, so that if you can't afford the latest designer clothing, it doesn't matter, because everybody's wearing the same thing.

### **Kamras's Goals as a Teacher**

Well, my goals right now are to come back to Sousa Middle School in the fall. I very much look forward to it. I miss my students quite a bit, and as far as the future goes, you know, I really do take it year by year. I think it's one of the wonderful things about this profession, that you have so many opportunities to make an impact, and perhaps one day down the line I'd like to open up my own school and try my hand at broadening my impact, and see if I can be successful as a school leader, in addition to being a teacher.

### **Advice for New Teachers**

Number one is that there are no easy answers. And I'm not punting on the question; I just think that sometimes new teachers or struggling teachers are looking for that single thing that will make everything work in their classrooms, and I don't think that single thing exists. I think it's actually much more mundane than that. It's about hard work, day in and day out, and I think once you accept that, it makes you a more powerful teacher.

Really try to focus on relationships: relationships with your students, relationships with your colleagues, relationships with your students' families. I've found that those can be so key to helping you be effective in the classroom. Those relationships with parents give you the credibility to have some tough discussions with them. Relationships with the students help get them through — and help get you through — difficult times in class, and the relationships with your colleagues help you be more effective in that school setting.

And then I'd say, one more thing that I often tell new teachers is, don't ever be satisfied with your performance. I think really being reflective about what you do, and always asking yourself how you can improve — videotaping yourself, having others come and observe you, observing other excellent teachers — is so essential to that process.

And don't ever expect that you're ever going to get perfect at this. Last year, when I was named Teacher of the Year, I had many weeks that I was not proud of, and I'm happy to admit that. Teaching is a difficult endeavor, and it's something that you're constantly improving on. And as long as you're committed to that process of improvement, I think you will be an effective educator.

**End Part Two**