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**How to create a nurturing environment for students. This is episode 113.**

*The Ten-minute Teacher podcast with Vicki Davis. Every week day you'll learn powerful practical ways to be a more remarkable teacher today.*

VICKI: Today, we're here with one of my favorite principals, Nancy Blair, [@blairteach](https://twitter.com/blairteach) to talk about creating a nurturing environment for students. So, Nancy, you're a principal. How do we create a nurturing environment for students?

NANCY: Well, and let me say, I'm also a middle school principal, which is an interesting age to connect with children because you have so many children that do want to connect, who still want to hug on you, and you have other ones who want to be considered adult-like and they would just assume you won't end their sphere.

So, it can be a critical challenge to build relationships with children in middle grades. In our building, we've made that a priority. We're a [Georgia] Lighthouse School to Watch, <https://gamiddleschoolassociation.org/georgia-lighthouse-schools-to-watch-list/> so that means that we make an extra effort to be not only culturally responsive but that we also want to be socially equitable and developmentally responsive in addition to the academics.

VICKI: Wow. That sounds like a big task, Nancy. I mean, how does that look with creating a nurturing environment? Because -- it's a lot of big words?

NANCY: Well, when I first came here, that was a primary goal of mine. And so about halfway through the year, we did an activity and we had the teachers, in five minutes, list the names of all the students that they knew; not only ones they were currently teaching but any students whose names they knew. And we compiled a list. And then we found all the children that nobody in the building, 60-some teachers, nobody mentioned.

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And then talked about why does this happen, how can this happen, and what do we need to put in place to make sure this doesn't happen. We over time have continued that kind of practice to make sure that every child has some kind of positive contact with people that somebody really knows them. We take the time to build relationships with children through teambuilding activities and just conversation.

VICKI: What would a teambuilding activity look like between you and your students?

NANCY: Well, this isn't exactly a teambuilding activity but it's something that we started this year, which has also led to increased student relationship building and the sense of belonging and caring in the building. And we started an activity period once a week that's cross-grade level. And it's interest-driven. The children had over 50 options to sign up their first, second and third choice, and they range from physical kinds of activities like team sports or running or walking, to robotics and working on their science fair project. There's a quiet reflection room for children who want to just think and be and pray, whatever they want to do quietly to themselves; reading, do-it-yourself groups. And so, tapping into the children's interest and allowing them not only to sign up for what they wanted, but they are free to suggest activities that they would like us to have a group to do, it's made a huge impact on the student population. And the teachers talk about getting to know the children in a different way, and children that they don't normally see. It's been really quite incredible to watch that unfold.

VICKI: So that's once a week for how long?

NANCY: That's a 45-minute period. And it changes quarterly. So, we are encouraging children to try new things, but if they have a passion and an interest, just keep that, if that's what they want to do.

VICKI: So, you've given us two incredible things. You know, in five minutes, listing all the students you know, and that's just an unbelievable activity. And then having these unique experiences. Do you have any other ideas?

NANCY: We do have our sixth graders who write letters to the incoming sixth graders, telling them what to expect. We have a group of students called Panther Partners, because we're the Rising Star Panthers, that tour and connect with every new child who comes in the building.

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So that we, from the very beginning, make sure that children have somebody to connect with. We've increased, through our literacy program, problem-based and passion-based learning so that children feel like they're the drivers of their learning and that they're invested in what they're doing.

VICKI: I'd like to go back. I'm just really sitting here thinking about, you know, every school probably has these kids that nobody knows as deeply as they should. Did it just break your heart when you found that there were students that people didn't have close relationships with?

NANCY: Yes. And more importantly, teachers were shocked. And I can't remember – this was almost three years ago; I can't remember the exact percentages. But they were shocked at the high percentage of children that nobody mentioned. And it did vary by grade level.

VICKI: Wow. So, did you see anything change when you really focused on those students who had kind of, I guess, been left out of mind?

NANCY: Yes. Because I think that just bringing that to awareness of the faculty helped a lot. And they're much more intentional about the kinds of things they're doing with children, the kinds of conversations they're having with children. We've really made an effort to engage children in people-to-people conversation and not just only academic conversation. And I think that helps.

VICKI: Well, we have to relate before we can educate. Do you feel like that the relationships have improved over the last few years?

NANCY: I do. And our discipline figures have declined every year over the last three years. So I think that that plays into it. We also administratively make a very big effort to be visible and make connections and conversation with children, especially at lunchtime. We wander through the tables and engage children in conversation so that they see us as people.

VICKI: Wow. And you can see so many things at lunch. I mean, you can see the kid eating by themselves, you can read the body language. I mean, there's just so much you can pick up on at lunches, isn't there?

NANCY: Right. That's very important.

VICKI: Okay. So just be in there; you've got some fantastic ideas for nurturing.

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And let me ask you this, Nancy – and we probably should have done this at the beginning but we didn't – how would you define nurturing? Because, you know, I know some people who don't really like the word "nurture". I don't know why, but they don't.

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NANCY: Yeah. I would define nurturing as caring in a supportive way, that we need to provide the supports necessary and the relationships with children to – it's like watering flowers. They need care and love and support in order to be the people they need to be. The vision of our school is to inspire and prepare children to succeed, and it ends right there. Because our goal is that children be successful in whatever they choose to do, and that they have the skills necessary to be prepared to be successful. Whether that next thing is high school, whether it's further on in life, we want them to be prepared; inspired to do something, and prepared to do whatever it is they need to do.

VICKI: I think one of the most heartbreaking things, Nancy, is that some kids maybe aren't being nurtured at home. Do you see that?

NANCY: Yes. We do see that. Of course, we make every effort to be the area where children can connect when they don't have somebody to connect with.

VICKI: Yes. And that makes nurturing more important than ever. So, remarkable educators, to be remarkable, you have to have that relationship. You do need to nurture students. You do need to encourage and care about students. And we have gotten some fantastic ideas from Nancy Blair. I also want to give a shout out to EdChat Radio, her podcast program in the weekly chat, and all that she does alone, because she does share with a lot of us her experience as a middle school principal.

NANCY: Well, thank you, Vicki, for having me.

VICKI: Staples is my go-to back-to-school shopping source. Check out [coolcatteacher.com/pro](http://coolcatteacher.com/pro) for my 10 ways to tackle back-to-school like a pro.

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