

Trees and Kids (from Teachers Change Lives 24/7)



Teachers
Change
Lives 24/7

[I'm a publisher and I read all the mail that our readers send. Sometimes (not very often) we have a story or a section of a book that brings lots of spontaneous letters of joy and praise from readers. "Trees and Kids" is the hands-down winner. It's by Jim Burgett in his 2007 book (in its fifth printing) called [Teachers Change Lives 24-7: 150 Ways to Do It Right](#). I thought my blog readers might enjoy it too.]

TREES AND KIDS

There is an unusual tree commonly known as the Chinese Bamboo Tree. It is real. Years ago I heard a speaker talk about it, using it to make a point. It stuck in my head. I even did some research to find out if the speaker was blowing smoke and made up the tree. He didn't.

The story goes like this. You prepare the soil, pick the right spot, then plant the Chinese Bamboo Tree. You water it and wait. But you wait an entire year and nothing appears. No bud, no twig, nothing. So you keep watering and protecting the area and taking care of the future plant, and you wait some more. You wait another year and nothing still happens. Okay, you are a persistent person not prone to giving up, so you keep on watering. You water, check the soil, start talking to the

ground, maybe even click your heels in some kind of growing dance you read about in the National Geographic. Another year passes and still no sign of growth.

It has been three years. Should you give up? Someone told you that it might take a while to really see the fruits of your efforts, so you keep on keeping on. More water, more talk, more dancing. The neighbors are wondering. And another year passes. No tree.

You now make a decision. If there is no tree on this date one year from now you will stop watering. Period. So you begin year number five with the same passion as day number one. You water, you wait. You keep watering and keep waiting. You water some more and then, could it be? Is it really? Yep, there it is, something sticking out of the dirt. You come back the next day and WOW it has really grown! In fact you come back each day for about six weeks and finally the Chinese Bamboo tree stops growing—but it is over 80 feet tall! Yes, 80 feet in six weeks! Well, not really. It is 80 feet in five years.

The point is simple. If you had given up for even the shortest period of time, there would be no tree. It took almost impossible persistence. The Chinese Bamboo tree is there for one reason and one reason only—because you never gave up on it.

When I talk to teachers at workshops or institutes I find one who teaches first grade and I ask that person to mentally think of a student who they wouldn't mind see moving to another district. You get the drift, a student who is a real challenge. Let's give the student a name. I'll use my own name to be politically correct. The kid is named Jim. I ask the teacher if they ever had a student like Jim that they really worked hard with, tried every trick in the book, searched for new ways to meet the child's learning needs, and so on, but still felt that at the end of the year that Jim had not learned. That Jim was still a challenge, and although he met

the minimum standards to pass, he was not on the teacher's list of proudest achievements. Most teachers usually agree that they have, or had, a Jim in their class.

Now we move to a second grade teacher and we pretend that they get Jim in the fall, work with him all year, watch their hair turn from brunette to shades of stressful gray, and by the end of the year feel they did their best, but it wasn't good enough.

Now, for a minute, let's talk about little Jimmy. He's not in special ed. Jimmy is just a jerk. Don't fall off your chair and gasp, "Did he call that kid a jerk?" I did, but not the jerk you are thinking of. My JERK is an acronym for Just Educationally Resistive Kid. He doesn't have ADD or any other alphabetized condition. He just doesn't like to learn and he resists it. He isn't a bad kid or a troublemaker. "Jimmys" exist in all sizes and shapes and even come in girl forms.

Let's jump to grade three. We have the same conversation all over again. Jim is passed on but he is a disappointment to every teacher so far, and they all worry that if things don't turn around Jim could become a troublemaker or an academic disgrace.

Jim holds his own in grade four. No big changes. He surely doesn't love school, but he isn't failing anything. He exhibits no passion for anything at the schoolhouse. And no signs of any real change either.

Grade five. Jim has a new teacher and all the other teachers try to warn her that Jim is, well, how do we say it? Jim is special, but not special ed. He exists, but barely. He will continue to be a challenge, but he's not a threat to safety. Jim is Jim. Try anything, but nothing will probably work. If you don't believe me, ask all of his previous teachers.

At semester break the new teacher makes a comment about Jim at a teachers meeting. With anticipated sadness, everyone

listens. Here is what she says...

"Jim is quite a writer. He turned in a couple of stories and I told him he was very creative. He is now writing a mystery story and it is good! And he's also showing some talent in basketball. He's really growing too. I love his passion to play ball and write. He seems to thrive on the success of his hook shot and his imagination. I really enjoy that kid." Jim has arrived!

Was it the new teacher who pulled out Jim's hidden talents and secret love for learning? Was it some biological change that caused Jim to mature and become a better learner, a more serious student? Was it his physical abilities that expanded his self-esteem and made it easier for him to write?

Maybe it was a little of all these things, but it was also what I call the Chinese Bamboo Factor. Every teacher Jim had since he entered school worked hard providing opportunities for Jim to learn, to grow, and to become. Every teacher watered, fertilized, and cared for Jim. Even when the year ended and they were sometimes glad to pass him on to another teacher, they still knew that they had done their best to give him the best.

Oh, by the way, my story could stop and start at any grade. And Jim could be Janet, and the teacher could be a he rather than a she. It doesn't matter. What does matter is the Chinese Bamboo Factor—never, ever quit on a student. Even when you see no progress, it doesn't mean that the kid isn't processing something somehow somewhere.

One more thing, a big thing: the Chinese Bamboo Tree did start to grow very shortly after the seed was planted. The roots grew deep and strong for many years before there was any sign of a plant above ground. Sometimes that same thing happens with kids. They develop a foundation of learning. They learn to learn. They creep along doing the minimum, building their

strengths (or finding them), and sometimes they just wait for the right combination of factors before they bloom. It may be the motivation of a certain teacher or a new found confidence or skill. It may be that all of a sudden “they get it” and learning becomes exciting. If we knew exactly what the formula was and how it worked for everyone, we could probably cure the ills of the world.

So what do we learn from the Chinese Bamboo Tree? I’d suggest the following:

- * It takes patience to teach some, even most, kids.
- * When you give up on a kid, you give up on a human being.
- * Even when you don’t see progress, if you do your best, it is probably happening.
- * If something doesn’t work with a kid, try something else—but never quit trying.
- * Some of our best teaching doesn’t “break soil” until all conditions are right.
- * When you think you are growing a tree, you may be growing a root.
- * Strong roots support strong trees.
- * Sometimes it takes a lot of patience to change a life.

—

Jim Burgett is a veteran educator, nationally recognized education speaker, and consultant. He was named the “Illinois Superintendent of the Year” by the American Association of School Administrators and “Administrator of the Year” by the Illinois Association for Educational Office Professionals. Burgett has received numerous honors and recognition for his leadership and skills as a motivator. Jim serves on many boards for the State of Illinois, various professional organizations, the Editorial Board for an educational publisher, and several community organizations. He is the recipient of the Award of Excellence from the Illinois State Board of Education, was named a Paul Harris Fellow by Rotary

International, and was a finalist for Teacher of the Year in Illinois.

Education has been the cornerstone of his career. Jim has been a teacher of grades five through twelve and a principal of elementary, middle school, and high school. During his 38-year tenure, Jim has served as the Superintendent of the Elizabeth Community Unit School District, the River Ridge Community Unit School District, and the Highland Community Unit School District, all in Illinois. Jim retired from the Blue-Ribbon Highland District in 2004.

He has frequently published in professional journals, speaks across the country to a variety of organizations, and has keynoted most major educational conferences nationwide. Jim Burgett is known for his practical leadership. He consults many districts, leads strategic planning sessions, and has been a leader in such areas as school construction, administrative standards, and effective teaching strategies.

In addition to writing [Teachers Change Lives 24/7](#), Jim's most recent books are [The Art of School Boarding: What Every School Board Member Needs to Know](#) and [The School Principal's Toolbook](#). Burgett also co-authored [Finding Middle Ground in K-12 Education](#) with Brian Schwartz and both [What Every Superintendent and Principal Needs to Know](#) and [The Perfect School](#) with Jim Rosborg and Max McGee. Jim also wrote “