

Lessons Learned From Middle School Part One

October 10, 2012

This writing is a little different than past articles hosted by the Sutton Law Office. Today I plan to recap my recent adventures into Metro-Atlanta area middle schools and what I think we can learn from those experiences, especially relating to public speaking.

On September 17th, I was the guest speaker at McNair Middle School's Constitution Day celebration. It was an honor to be involved and doubly so to be the keynote presenter for the event. I wanted to discuss the significance of the U.S. Constitution in a manner that was interesting to thirteen year olds while not talking over their heads or talking down to them. It was a difficult balance, but overall I say the presentation was a success.

There were about 150 students in the audience from twelve years old to fourteen. As I stood back and observed the crowd, I saw a typical division of kids that age. There was a small group of students who were completely engaged in the event. They sat near the front and seemed to hang on every word spoken by the presenter. There was a small group of students who were not interested in the event at all. These students needed the most supervision by the teachers. The majority of the students fell in the middle. They showed some interest in the event, but their attention could wane easily, especially without direct observation by adults. This breakdown of the audience was certainly not abnormal. It can be seen in almost any group in elementary school, in law school, and even in a jury pool.

On September 25th I participated in the Cobb County Chamber of Commerce's Teacher for a Day program. This program paired a business leader with a local school and gave him, or her, the opportunity to shadow a teacher for a day. I was paired with science teacher, and teacher of the year award winner, James Hawk at Danielle Middle School. Rather than just shadow him for the day, Mr. Hawk encouraged me to interact with each of his classes. He allowed me to give a presentation to each class on the use of the scientific method in the practice of law, its use in other professions, and its use in everyday life. The day was very different from McNair's Constitution Day celebration in many respects. For example, rather than addressing a gathering of about 150 students, I spoke with five classes of about 20 to 25 students each. This was quite a different dynamic compared to the larger setting and required a different type of preparation. However, there were also similarities between the two experiences. Foremost, even though I was dealing with a smaller group of students per sitting, I saw a very similar division of students who were completely interested, students who were not interested, and students who fell in the middle.

The primary goal as a speaker was to gain and hold as much of the attention of as many of the students as possible while being as educational as possible. Sub-parts of this goal include pulling the interests of all three groups and, at the very least, not agitating or completely losing any group. Some people say that a better approach is to focus only on that large group in the middle. They sug-

gest that the small group already engaged does not need the attention, and that attention directed towards the small uninterested group is wasted. I disagree. People can, and sometimes do move within the three groups. This is especially true for kids. Students, and people in general, who begin very interested and engaged can be lost if no attention is given to them at all. As for the kids who are not initially interested in being involved, you never know what could make the proverbial light bulb flash on. You never know what will invoke the realization that “I get it” or “I want to know more”. It could be a single idea or sentence. That opportunity alone is worth some attention.

While standing before the students, at both events, staring at eyes that ranged from attentive and excited to glossy and bored, I realized that this is a very difficult situation teachers face every day. The simple question of “How can I engage everyone?” does not have a very good answer. At both events I met some outstanding teachers and school professionals who use all sorts of creative ways to grab student’s interest and educate them. However, the struggle remains and is not just limited to middle school. Any speaker that addresses a crowd knows this struggle. Any attorney that addresses a jury knows it. Any person that addresses a board of directors, supervisors, or subordinates knows it.

While I do not believe there is a single great answer to the question of how to engage everyone, my experiences at both middle schools lead me to believe there are some basic tools that anyone can use to better connect with an audience. In part two, we will discuss these tools, how they worked in a middle school environment, and how they can be used by anyone.

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