

Q&A: Books, blogs help teacher reach beyond Sacramento classroom - Sacramento News - Local and Breaking Sacramento News

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Burbank High School teacher Larry Ferlazzo works with freshman students Rich Xiong, left, and Palee Vang. One of Ferlazzo's blogs has 25,000 daily subscribers.

Sacramento teacher Larry Ferlazzo uses the written word to share what he's learned in the seven years since he left his job as a community organizer to become an English teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento.

Ferlazzo, 51, has two successful blogs and an [active Twitter account](#), and his third book – «Helping Students Motivate Themselves» – is due out next month.

He started a blog, [Websites of the Day](#), four years ago to share best practices of using technology with English-language learners. The blog now has 25,000 daily subscribers. In this interview, he discusses his upcoming book and education issues.

When you got into teaching, did you know the kind of school where you wanted to teach?

I wanted to teach in an urban environment. I was particularly interested in working with immigrant students. My parents were immigrants and most of my organizing career was in urban communities.

My father was from Italy and my mother from Trinidad My father actually began working as a linguistics professor at Rutgers, but he decided he wasn't making enough money to support a family so he worked for a big company managing imports/exports and he taught immigrants English at a night school.

Your latest book is about motivating students. So what motivates them?

A number of things, including seeing that by learning stuff, neurons in the brain actually grow. ... I show them that by working hard, they can physically make their brain grow.

Is the goal of your latest book to help teachers motivate students?

I've never motivated a student. The challenge is to help students figure out and identify their own motivation. There is this fallacy that teachers can get up there and be entertaining, but if you aren't effective in learning what is important to students and connecting it to students, it will always be pushing the rope.

That requires you to be pretty involved with each student. Are you calling home and paying attention to their personal lives?

Oh yeah, we call home, we do home visits. Burbank is a national model for home visits. In the summer, some 60 staffers at Burbank did several hundred home visits. I call home, I talk to students to find out what's going on in their lives. You can't divorce the two. Fortunately, our class sizes are small enough to where it's less difficult.

Sacramento City Unified just made \$28 million in cuts, raising class sizes in high school to 40 students unless voters approve tax extensions. How will that affect teachers?

Increasing class sizes to that number is a terrible idea. Plenty of research documents the importance of teacher/student relationships for academic achievement. That entails getting to know students, lear-

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ning what their goals and hopes are, finding out what prior knowledge they bring to the table How can a teacher do that if they have close to 200 students each day?

Why do you feel merit pay is a bad idea?

Offering teachers additional money to get increased scores will not generate better teaching. It will generate teaching to the test We do lots of other authentic assessments that give us useful and timely data to inform our instruction with a particular student. Life is not a multiple choice.

At times, you take on the reform agenda in your blog and with your contributions to the Washington Post's education blog. Do you ever write about your students?

I do. I print those out, and students read it. It's important to share it. ... I don't write negative things. It's valuable to share with students what you write about. They recognize that you think about them outside the class.

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