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Landon Wynne—Collegiate President  
collegiate@wmea.org



## It's the little things

In the last couple of months I have been thinking about change. Specifically speaking, I have been considering the mechanisms of change in people. This process, sparked by a desire to better influence my students, has led me to appreciate the gradual nature of significant developments. I am becoming increasingly convinced that people are most influenced by everyday things. Put simply, I believe it's the little things that actually change people.

Before I go any further, some definition must be given to "the little things," as the phrase is admittedly vague. The "little things" are simple, everyday things that are of no clear consequence, but shape our interactions. Little things are the details that bring character to a person and color to a social situation. I'm talking about the seemingly insignificant things such as greeting someone, making eye contact, noticing a recent haircut and asking about his or her life. These social gestures are also manifested in physical expressions and mannerisms: the "show me you're listening" effect, if you will.

The subtlety of these small details is key to their overall bearing on our lives. This brings up the importance of discussing what the little things are not. They are not boisterous or eventful, nor are they showy or frivolous. While festivals, retreats, conferences and major events have overt ways of impacting people, the little things are modest in their approach to influence. While the importance of life's great events cannot be denied, they are often overstated; meanwhile, the extraordinary place of ordinary things is incredibly soft-spoken. Take, for example, the social relationship of friendship. True friends are known not for their kind actions in an isolated or single instance, but for their consistent record of friendliness. It is this consistency of everyday actions that communicates friendship and gives evidence to actual values.

American father, congressman, advertising executive and author Bruce Barton once wrote, "Sometimes, when I consider what tremendous consequences come from little things, I am tempted to think there are no little things." In a strikingly similar vein, I recall a conversation I once had with a couple who had, at the time, been married for over 50 years. I asked them, somewhat jokingly, what

their secret to success was. After thinking for a second, the husband replied very seriously (and I am paraphrasing, since I didn't expect such a treasure of a response) that every little expression of love matters; every surprise rose, every cooked meal, every "thank you" and every quick embrace. When I consider both of these insights, I realize how significant the little things actually are.

As unimportant and forgettable as the little things appear, they are the marks of influence that characterize inspiring teachers. Now that I am beginning to overcome the initial "panic mode" that befalls the inexperienced in education, some practical realities of effective instruction are becoming clear. I have begun to notice the nuanced way one of my mentor teachers addresses students. Not only does she advocate for students to "dare to care," but she also models this constantly and quietly for them. Whenever a student speaks, she listens intently and responds thoughtfully. I am always impressed with her devotion to remembering her students' birthdays. I have overheard students saying to each other, about this teacher, "I love that she always asks how my day is going." I could go on and on about each of these, but the point is: by committing

to excellence in the little things, great teachers model excellence every day.

I have found, though they are simple, the little things are surprisingly difficult to commit to practice. Maybe it is because they seem so insignificant and are easily forgotten, the details take so much time to master. It is easy to get caught up in the flow of the lesson or in the rush of a concert, while it is very hard to make a habit of welcoming students in or to think to ask a tardy student if everything is okay. In fact, my level of attentiveness to the little things can explain both my most and least successful teaching moments. I suppose the old adage may still ring true: "The devil is in the details."

All in all, I have learned to respect the power of the day to day. I admire those who expertly wield the little things to best inspire their students. As Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, "To be really great in little things, to be truly noble and heroic in the insipid details of everyday life, is a virtue so rare as to be worthy of canonization." I am attempting to become "great in the little things" and I encourage others to make the same, valuable effort.



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