

Excerpt from The College Academy (a small school in the George Washington HS complex in Upstate Manhattan - the Heights):

“OK kids. I want to tell you that I am really pissed at the way you are being treated in this so-called art class. I’ve been here all week and nobody has given me a lesson plan for you. That really pisses me off.” I start to raise my voice. They are most attentive. They are watching a bomb about to detonate.

“You deserve more than this shitty treatment.” Cursing always helps keep a teenager’s attention. “You must realize that you are getting shitty treatment in this class.” They nod their heads. I pause. I look around. The room is lined with student-made origami birds. Maybe these kids made them and this is just a busy week for the APs. After all, Quality Review is a tense time. Let’s find out. “Did you make these birds?” I ask them.

“No.”

“Did you do any of the art that’s hanging up on the walls?”

“No Miz.” That seals it. I’m mad tight.

“Listen!! This is an art class. It should be great. It should be your favorite class. I’ve been in twenty other schools this year. I’ve seen art classes, the last friggin’ class on Friday and the kids are dying to get in so they can work on their projects. They have great computers with up to date software, cameras, lighting, clay, paints, canvases.” I raise my voice. “And what do you have but this stupid F’in’ box with a bunch of colored pencils that need sharpening. *AND THERE’S NO F’IN’ SHARPENER!!! NOW DOESN’T THAT PISS YOU OFF???*”

“Yes Miz.”

“That’s not right Miz.”

“We should have computers and cameras.” They call out their agreement as they observe my controlled burn.

“So I would like us to create an art project that will express our outrage at this bullshit. You with me?”

“Yes Miz!!” A chorus of support.

“OK. So we’re going to create a political protest using art and photography. Check it out.”

I head to the white board and write in big capital letters across the top,

***WE DESERVE A REAL ART CLASS***

Underneath it, I write phrases:

Great Materials!                      Ideas!

Plans!                                      Creativity!

Computers!

I’m stuck. I turn around to them.

“What else do you want from an art class?”

“Trips,” one little girl calls out.

I write on the board:

Trips to Museums.

“All right. Now. I want to set up a photo. I’m not allowed to take pictures of kids in school but I’d still like you pose in front of this board with your back to the camera. And...I want you to raise both your hands and stick up your third finger. Get it?” They start to jump up and approach the board. “We gotta be able to read what it says.” As I place them around the writing, a couple of them grab markers and draw third finger icons around my writing. I head to the middle of the classroom and start snapping pictures of them with my iPad.

“More outrage!! You’re pissed!!” I say. They shoot up their hands in angry protest.

“OK! We got it!!” I tell them. They run up to me and gather around the iPad.

“Lemme see, Miz. Lemme see!!”

“Oh! Tha’s funny, Miz.”

“I don’t know about you but I feel better. Was that fun?” I ask them.

“Yeah Miz. I wish you din’t have to go.”

“You should be our art teacher.”

“Could you be our art teacher?”

“I’m sorry but I don’t have a license to teach art. But I’m gonna put this in a book I’m writing and I hope you will read it and stay in touch with me. Whatever happens, don’t ever let anybody make you think you deserve anything less than the absolute best of everything. Especially your education.”

“OK Miz.”

“And don’t you settle when somebody tries to give you a stupid F’ing cardboard box with a few lousy F’ing pencils and call it art supplies. You deserve a whole lot more than a stupid little box.”

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