

What Educators Are Trying to Teach Us as They Walk Out the Door

As more teachers leave the field because of problematic students, taxpayers find themselves paying the price

By Jay Burcham

Thanksgiving is just one week away, and already teachers are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel when they'll celebrate the mid-year, Winter break. For many, the holidays will serve as a time to begin reflecting over whether or not they'll return for the 2007/2008 school year. And why should they?

Our schools are losing teachers at an alarming rate of more than 1,000 every school day. And the cost to the taxpayer to replace them is staggering. According to a study by the Alliance for Excellent Education (1), the cost of replacing teachers who are dropping out of the teaching profession is conservatively estimated to be \$2.2 billion. The costs per state range from \$8.5 million for North Dakota to over \$500 million for Texas.

Surprising to many, teachers are leaving the field in droves not because of poor wages, heavy workloads and frustration with their administration. They're leaving because of problematic student behavior. According to the AEE study, more than 53 percent of teachers interviewed cited student behavior as one of the main reasons for leaving.

There is a distinct feel amongst teachers that they do not control their classrooms. Nor do they have a say in how to address the problem.

Teachers are willing to work long hours. They are willing to work at home and on weekends. They are also willing to go the extra mile to prepare for the subjects that are based within the competencies of their education. The real problem lies in the fact that they are being forced outside of their areas of competency to change their classroom cultures.

Aside from the fact that teachers are given strict mandates for performance, they are also left completely on their own to rein in 20 – 30 different personalities spanning multiple racial, socio-economic, functional, and familial levels and create an environment where learning can occur.

When you work long hours and spend a great deal of time preparing lesson plans, you don't have time to figure out how to manage an uncontrollable classroom, especially not when you're forced to meet stringent benchmarks for academic performance.

We now have an educational system that espouses accountability, yet the accountability is measured solely on the academic proficiency of the students. Reading and science and math are the benchmarks of a job well done. Yet when you look at the reason teachers are leaving, it is not because they cannot teach reading and writing and science. It is because

their classrooms are untenable and they have not been given the resources and time to change them. They can do their jobs, if they are just given the chance.

Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, “Intelligence plus character is the goal of a true education.” We have replaced that with a high standardized test score as the goal of a true education. And while testing is viewed as vital to helping the United States serve as the standard bearer for academic performance and ability, teaching to a test is not an education.

It is a fact that we have students functioning at all levels of academic ability. This is accounted for within the curriculum. And it’s a dirty little secret that there is an acceptable loss rate of students. It is statistically okay to let a certain number of students slip through the cracks within the accountability matrices that currently exist. “No Child Left Behind” is a misnomer. A more accurate slogan would be “Most kids passing the test.”

The problem lies in the inherent fact that the range of functioning within a classroom is not limited to academic abilities. There is also a range of social functioning that has a direct impact on a teacher’s ability to create and maintain a learning environment.

How do you teach to a test when you have students who won’t sit down and be quiet? How do you teach the rigors of science when you have students who don’t understand the basics of social rules? The classroom is after all a social gathering and even though it is autocratic by design that autocratic authority only works when the authority is understood and respected.

“Teaching Interrupted” a study found at www.publicagenda.org states that 85 percent of our current teachers feel that new teachers are not prepared for what they are going to experience in the classroom. They know how to teach reading and science and math. They don’t know how to deal with the students who are disrespectful, students who have no support system at home, students who have no desire to achieve. And they don’t know how to deal with an administration that accepts none of the above as an excuse for not reaching pre-ordained goals.

The issue is that we have defined a successful education as one that creates a student population that scores within an acceptable range in the education arenas that govern global commerce.

The problem within the issue is that this form of fundamentalist education does not take into account the students who are not prepared to participate at the right level. Teachers are not given the resources they need to develop their students socially and emotionally to create a proper learning environment. Students are not given the self-confidence and are not taught the social parameters for societal success needed to understand the value of a global commerce education.

Teachers are not leaving the profession because they cannot teach. Teachers are leaving because they are not being allowed to teach what is important.

Rene Descartes said, “To know what people really think, pay regard to what they do, rather than what they say.” People go into the teaching profession because they want to teach. They want to mold the minds of children and create opportunities for them to succeed in life.

Teachers are leaving because the opportunity to truly educate is no longer valued. Yes, we are teaching. But we are not fully educating and preparing our children for life. And teachers are walking out. Their actions are speaking volumes.

I think teachers are trying to teach us something as they walk out the door. They want the time and resources to prepare their students for life. Yes, competing and success within the global economy is important, but so is self-esteem and friendship.

The strictures of science must be learned, but the value of respect and tolerance is just as important. Reading is an absolute, but so is good citizenship. Teachers are trying to tell us something and until we listen, children will be left behind.

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(1) Study from Alliance for Education Excellence found at www.all4ed.org/publications/TeacherAttrition.pdf