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Past, Present, & Future

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I became a very serious teacher. Like many new teachers, I took the old saying "Don't let the students see you smile until after winter break" to heart. I felt that the key to success as a teacher was complete control of my classroom. Any misbehavior would immediately result in students' cards on my classroom flip chart being turned to yellow or, for repeat offenders, to the dreaded red.

And then came a particularly stressful day. The kids were especially noisy; they all seemed to be tipping their chairs and falling backward; there were a lot of arguments and a lot of tears. There were several impatient messages waiting for me from parents. And just as I was about to begin a math lesson, a little boy in my class dared—Dared!—to call out without raising his hand, "Hey everybody look! I'm Mr. Schaen!" The boy had placed a pencil behind his ear, like I usually did.

For several moments there was silence. During those moments, my very brief teaching career flashed before my eyes—and something inside me changed. I thought about how my students came to school every day laughing, some of them even running because they were so excited. I looked at my bulletin board with the misspelled, enthusiastic notes my students had written to me—"Mr. Shan Is The Bast!" and "Scool Rocks!" I thought about how my students already seemed to be better readers than they were when the school year had started.

Then I did something the students had never seen before: I laughed. And, as more and more pencils began going behind boys' and girls' ears, we all laughed together.

Maybe teaching philosophies have changed since my days as a teacher's aide. But I have never forgotten the advice of my mentor. Just have fun with it. I still come to school with a smile.

—Richard Schaen
Elm Avenue Elementary School
Wyoming, Ohio

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Rocket Fuel

Teacher Support for Energized Classrooms

DAN BROWN

The SEED Public Charter School of Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Brown,

I have always loved reading and brainstorming, but I haven't always loved my English classes. This is my first English class that I truly enjoyed. This class has taught me so much. I feel like it has changed me into a new person. As a Pakistani Muslim, I have always been taught to never commit a sin and to hate and stay away from sinners. I have always hated so many people, probably because I was forced to be the "perfect" person and follow rules, more than half of which aren't even a part of my religion (and make no sense to me) but rather are part of the Pakistani culture.

*One set of these people I truly have hated are "prostitutes." I thought they were the lowest of all people. But after reading *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker, I realized something. No one wakes up and decides that they want to commit a sin today. Walker considers the African American women she writes about to be saints instead of sinners. These women were forced into prostitution and were kept from reading, writing, or expressing their creativity. Like Nick's dad tells him in the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, don't be too quick to judge someone because you may have something that person may not have had.*

Realizing this made me so thankful that in my religion (and in many other religions) the first thing a kid should be taught is that God is the

kindest, most understanding, and most forgiving. God is not someone who punishes hate with hate, death with death, evil with evil. Just being able to understand this one thing has made all the difference to me. I am so thankful that you gave me those passages to read. I am even more thankful to you for making us write in our notebooks.

I have always been a person who loves to think about why life is the way it is, why there is so much hate and pain, why there is so much anguish in the world. I don't play a major role in my family. I keep to myself and love to think while I am alone. And it felt great to write those thoughts out and have someone else read them; it meant the world to me to have someone else "listen." Thank you for all you have done.

Sincerely,

—Leena B.

DeWitt Clinton High School

Bronx, NY

Why Choose the Classroom?

I don't want any other job.

Count me among the majority of teachers (almost two-thirds, according to NEA data [figure 2.21]) who intend to stay in teaching mainly because we want to work with young people. Letters like Leena's are rocket fuel. When I get a note like this, an after-class visitor, or even an appreciative nod from a student on the way out the door, I am reenergized. I want ten more. I buzz.

Positive feedback from a student renews my commitment to the marathon work of teaching. It keeps me coming back for more. I know I'm not alone. Public education is, at its core, a complex system of person-to-person interactions. Educators and students often spend more time with each other than with their own families. Those long hours shared in relatively small classroom spaces can create pressure

cookers, for good or ill. When either side is frustrated from achieving its potential, a ripple effect of cynicism can easily spread, diminishing student achievement and accelerating teacher turnover. But when all parties have the requisite skills to succeed together, the potential for rocket-fuel moments is limitless.

America's teaching force is aging. As the survey data (figure 2.8) reported in this volume indicate, nearly 35 percent of today's public teachers are over fifty—an all-time high. In the next decade we need to recruit two million new teachers. Many will be hungry for letters like Leena's, drawn to the profession by a love of students and a chance to contribute to society (the two most commonly cited reasons for entering teaching, according to the NEA data [figure 2.20]).

Nurturing these idealistic neophytes into experts and then retaining them are major challenges. It is a battle we're currently losing. More than one-third of teachers who expect to leave the profession before retirement cite factors associated with system-related stress as the underlying reason, while another quarter name low pay. Only 5 percent of teachers cite student-related reasons for leaving.¹

The three school experiences I describe below are emblematic of the crushing failures, great triumphs, and evolving efforts—both systemic and individual—in the battle to support teachers motivated by idealistic goals and their vulnerable students.

Hindrances to Good Teaching: Why Teachers Leave and Students Lose

Straight out of NYU Film School, I joined the New York City Teaching Fellows, an alternative certification program. Following seven frantic weeks of summer training, I was leading a volatile fourth-grade class at P.S. 85 in the Bronx.

My class teetered into chaos with unnerving ease. I was putting in well above the national average of class and prep time (fifty-two hours per week, according to NEA findings), and even so I struggled to keep up with the job's demands. (Think about that number: the average

teacher works *six-and-a-half* traditional eight-hour days each week).² Most days I rode the subway home in a stupor, exhausted and dismayed. I scratched out little, but important, victories: starting a peer-tutoring group and a Visual Arts Club, engaging in meaningful heart-to-hearts with several students, observing palpable progress in some. Still, I was ground down by the 210-minute instructional blocks I had to plan, prepare, and deliver; by stinging reprimands from an ambitious assistant principal; and, most of all, by the struggle to manage students' explosive behavior without administrative support.

Furthermore, a fixation on standardized test scores put a chokehold on my ability to experiment with lesson planning; many would-be creative classroom possibilities never materialized for lack of time. Such experiences are increasingly common: the number of teachers citing testing requirements as the top hindrance to good teaching has more than tripled from 2000 to 2005 (figure 2.23).

Because P.S. 85's faculty had split into acrimonious factions, peer support and mentoring were not available. I relied mostly on myself to improve my practice, gravitating to other rookies, my comrades-in-arms, for venting and encouragement. While I can't say we made each other into better practitioners, they did keep me from quitting midway.

The effects on my students were devastating and made for an unnecessarily turbulent fourth-grade year. I clung to isolated positive moments, but rocket fuel was in scarce supply, and I was more often overcome by distress. At year's end the administrators opted not to offer me a classroom position for the following term, and, after June, I resigned.

My flailing at P.S. 85 is a familiar narrative, illustrating the teacher attrition crisis in American public education. My lack of experience certainly hindered me. However, my classroom was also an embodiment of the top-reported teaching hindrances (figure 2.23): heavy workload, demands of teaching to the test, discipline problems, uncooperative or unsupportive administrators. These factors inevitably fostered both personal and classroom disorder that undermined any potential I may have had to succeed at P.S. 85.

Support for Excellent Teaching: Everything in Its Right Place

A year away from the classroom reaffirmed my interest in working with young people, and I enrolled at Teachers College, Columbia University, to train as a high school English teacher. My experience as a student teacher at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx could serve as a case study for how, under the right conditions, new teachers can succeed.

The NEA data cite "cooperative, competent colleagues and mentors" and "help from administrators and specialists" as the two most valuable supports identified by teachers (figure 2.22). I had both. I conferred daily with Ray Pultinas, a seventeen-year veteran. He observed my classes and provided actionable feedback in the form of longhand letters, which we later discussed. Our structured opportunities for reflecting on past lessons and collaborating on upcoming ones were invaluable in arming me with the strategies and skills—many of which were less than intuitive—to lead a classroom successfully.

As a student teacher, my workload accommodated this growing process. To teach my sixty-five students split between two classes, I spent about thirty hours per week planning, teaching, grading, and going to meetings. Only ten of those hours were spent in actual instructional periods—markedly fewer than the national average for regular full-time teachers, according to NEA survey data (figure 2.17). Each night I came home tired but not exhausted, and I looked forward to seeing my students the following day.

The teachers' lounge at Clinton was a bustling center for exchanging ideas and reflections. Two teachers invited me into their classrooms, where I picked up on different styles for engaging glazed-out students. The administrator supervising Clinton's forty English teachers observed me twice, and I used her feedback to good effect. I felt supported, not under attack. Clinton's community spirit and competent, cooperative colleagues fostered positive moments—the kind that facilitate quality classes and energize teachers.

This is how it's done! I wanted all classrooms to be as positive as the two I led at Clinton. I wasn't a master teacher; I had simply been provided an opportunity to own my class and to work with great colleagues without the common obstructions. The results were excellent learning experiences for my students and a sustained boost to my confidence, capability, and enthusiasm for staying in the profession. And one enduring, tangible reward—Leena's letter.

Making It Work: Teaching in Imperfect but Evolving Environments

A move to Washington, D.C., prevented me from accepting a full-time teaching position at DeWitt Clinton. However, I now have a world-class teacher education degree under my belt and a job I love. At the SEED Public Charter School, I hold a few aces that most public teachers do not. My classes range from ten to nineteen students, far below the national average of twenty-four pupils per high school class (figure 2.16). This is a blessing, and the individualized attention I can provide my students during class is essential. Also, I enjoy tremendous flexibility in crafting my curriculum, provided I hit the state standards. My principal knows my students and supports me. SEED also has allowed me to attend teaching conferences out of state and to partner locally with organizations like the PEN/Faulkner Foundation and the Shakespeare Theatre Company to bring authors and teaching artists to my classroom. These opportunities inspire me and my students.

SEED participates in an excellent professional development program called Take One! I count myself lucky; many teachers are crying out for useful programs like this. On average, teachers receive a mere six days per year of professional development, and one-quarter get no such support related to curriculum and instruction (table 2.2). The sustained support of Take One! has elevated my performance and put me on the road toward National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. Nationwide, less than 10 percent of teachers have attained or are working toward this accreditation.³

Still, I often struggle. What prompted Leena's letter was her appreciation that I listened to her through her writing. In her class I was scrupulous about returning student assignments, festooned with comments, the next day. In my current job, such quick turnaround is often impossible. A recent batch of exams took me upward of sixteen hours to mark. The workload of planning and leading my classes uses up virtually all of my time in the eight-hour school day, and I usually stay an hour or two after school to keep things afloat. Then I commute home, eager to spend time with my wife and baby daughter. But many evenings my folder of ungraded papers yanks at my brain like a kite string. I love my students and respect my colleagues, but the physical and mental exhaustion takes an insidious toll.

I'm working to find the balance of rigor and reality. According to colleagues, it's a lifelong search. The relentless workload haunts teachers, to their students' detriment. Chronic budget shortages tend to press teachers to cover more students and more classes, practices that represent steps backward in the campaign to retain strong teachers for the long haul. As enthusiastic as I am about teaching, I can't imagine carrying my current workload for the next three decades.

Recruiting and Retaining a New Generation of Strong Teachers

We can't count on an innate magic in America's 3.2 million public teachers to unlock the potential of our students. Leena's letter to me was not predestined; it was an outgrowth of a well-supported learning environment. The P.S. 85-style trial by fire—a gauntlet of the most common hindrances to good teaching—is clearly unacceptable; it burns through the precious human capital of teachers and students. The status quo of sink-or-swim teacher initiations will only perpetuate the revolving door of teacher attrition. Yet, if all incoming teachers could receive the DeWitt Clinton treatment—individualized support, mentoring and co-planning opportunities, and a manageable, reduced teaching load as they get up to speed—we'd find more confidence, longevity, and positive results for the profession.

Each year I get better, and there are more of these forward leaps. However, the long hours conspire against millions of teachers and students across the country to prevent an unknowable volume of breakthroughs from ever surfacing. At SEED those victories do happen, and when they come I still feel that renewing burst of enthusiasm and energy. In order to empower teachers to be their best, a new level of respect for the teaching profession must be a bedrock for modifying teachers' workloads, providing substantive opportunities for professional development, fostering a greater sense of ownership, and, inevitably, increasing pay.

Indeed, the most common reason given by teachers leaving the profession before retirement (25 percent) is low pay.⁴ The most recent NEA data (figure 2.26) put the average adjusted contract salary for an American public teacher at \$52,657. Most teachers are the breadwinners in their families; that \$52,657 accounts for about 56 percent of the average teacher's adjusted household income.⁵ This is not good enough. More competitive pay and opportunities for student loan forgiveness might bring in and retain many excellent teachers who are forced out of the profession by the economic realities.

A recent raft of politically popular reforms mute the screaming need for higher base salaries by emphasizing various models of performance pay. Regrettably, current iterations of performance pay aim for specious goals (ephemeral test-score bumps) and betray a cynical assumption that teachers just aren't trying hard enough. Teachers will take the much-needed extra money, but our country's educational foundation will not be strengthened. The breathing room teachers need to hone their craft and to connect with students will be choked by outsized emphasis on test prep—the anti-rocket fuel.

I have tasted sustained excellence in the classroom. It happened at DeWitt Clinton when I developed my craft among encouraging, reflective veterans. It happened when my job didn't consume my nights and weekends. It came when I was able to take time to focus intensively on the top reason that I, along with a majority of America's teachers, joined this profession—to work with and inspire their students.

It would be silly to define excellence solely by tabulating heart-lifting letters. But seeing the positive impact of my work is crucial to

maintaining the enormous energy required to plow through each epic school year. Quite often teaching is a leap of faith: you work with students for a year and then, uncertain of your influence, usher them forward on their long, winding journeys. Hopefully you've gathered compelling evidence of learning, but you can't expect or quantify inspiration. Yet in teaching, a thoroughly human endeavor, these points of connection are critical.

Imagine an American school system in which teachers taught fewer classes with fewer students and carved out significant time within the school day for collaboration. Consider a corps of teachers emboldened to hone their craft, not crippled by inadequate training and mind-bending stress. Envision schools where administrators are not under a crush of pressure to deliver stats, wedged into an unending series of conflicts between their bureaucratic directives and the genuine needs of students.

Classrooms come alive with quality teaching; the tools to foster that caliber of teaching are before us, unambiguously identified. I've seen and felt their powerful effects. The reflective, highly engaged response from Leena's class could be the norm, not the exception. The costs of not heeding teachers' on-the-ground needs are many; the rewards of zeroing in on what matters most are extraordinary. You get schools where teachers and students alike are inspired. You get classrooms powered by rocket fuel.

— A Voice from the Classroom —

When I was sophomore in college, I joined a tutorial program in a mid-western city. There had been race riots in the district, and I was a bit apprehensive as I rode a bus to my first meeting. Arriving at the school, I was escorted to a room in the basement of the building. A fourth-grade boy came over to me; he wore a white shirt, its collar soiled from several days' wear. His curly, black hair was cut close to his head, and his round brown eyes met mine. He carried a yellow number-two pencil in his hand. "You my teacher, Mr. John?"

I nodded, took out a reading book from the inside of the desk, and introduced myself: "My name is John, and I am a student just like you. I

am going to be your tutor." And I began the tutorial session. Every week, I ended each session with, "Next week—same time, same place." And he would say, "See you next week, Mr. John."

These initial tutorial sessions with my first student had a profound effect on my future teaching. Being called "Mr. John" resonated to my core. A simple act of respect. He saw me as a teacher. I dedicated myself to helping him become a reader. We shared a common goal. He never called me by my last name; he just called me Mr. John. That was fine for him and even finer for me.

Times do change. That same natural, mutual respect for student and teacher often seems irreclaimable. In my first year of teaching, administration advised me to establish student-teacher boundaries. Never become a friend to the student; be his teacher. Establish social boundaries. Never allow the student to know personal details. The student will learn, and you will gain professional satisfaction.

My students appear to be cleaner and better dressed than students were when I first began that tutorial session so many years ago. Their hair now is gelled and stands up like porcupine quills dyed red, pink, blue, green, and purple. One student wears an earring through his nose, while another plays with a gold stud that pierces her tongue. It is difficult for me to see through to the windows of their souls, since their eyes are obscured by thick mascara and blackened bangs. Instead of one student needing help with reading, fifteen students lack proficient skills in literacy.

At the beginning of every class, my students and I gather as a group to discuss our goals for the day. Then for twenty minutes we silently read books of our choice, the silence broken only by the turning of pages or the voices of professional readers on students' iPods. When the reading period ends, a third of the class works on the computer, improving their independent reading strategies; another third writes in their reading skill books, and the rest proofread a persuasive essay. A student aide meets with small groups to reinforce reading comprehension. I work individually with students on their writing while another assistant meets with students to discuss quarterly goals. Students are intent on the development of their skills, and as they travel through the three rotations, it is clear that they are becoming more responsive, more confident, better students.

At the end of eighty minutes, the hallway bell signals the end of class. Books are placed in their cubbies, the computers are shut down, and the chairs are pushed beneath the group desks. As students file out, a cacophony of shouts is heard: "Have a good day, Mrs. G. See you tomorrow, Ms. C. So long, Mr. F. Good-bye!"

I smile, place my hands behind my head, and tilt back in my chair, feet on the desk. Lifetimes of students pass through these classroom doors. The times change, and the styles reflect a new generation. Yet there are still constants—that children are my students and that I am their teacher. That natural, mutual respect still exists, and while "Mr. John" has become "Mr. F," there is still the belief that there is something honorable in being a teacher.

—John J. Fulco

Killingly High School

Danielson, Connecticut