



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
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The truth about teaching

Teacher Appreciation Week is drawing to a close. But I didn't want it to pass without a nod to our state's great educators. In my travels around the country, I often brag on our teachers. They are the ones on the front lines of learning day in and day out and are primarily responsible for the progress we have seen in recent years.

Coach John Wooden once said that the teaching profession contributes more to the future of our society than any other single profession. I agree. Regular readers of my blog know that I often cite the importance that other countries place on the teaching profession. We should follow their lead. As businessman Lee Iacocca once noted, in a completely rational society, the best of us would be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something else.

Most of us think we know what it means to teach, and by extension, to be a teacher.

But, the truth is, most people don't really know much about teaching. Their memories and perceptions come from being students — not teachers who spent hours, days and months preparing for them to arrive in their classrooms.

Most people have no knowledge of hours-long curriculum planning meetings, weekends spent correcting students' work or the time spent on professional learning seeking out new teaching strategies to help students master critical concepts.

Most people have never managed a classroom of 25 or more students, some of whom come to school angry or neglected, leery that another adult will let them down, but at the same time craving someone who will listen to them, see them, believe in them and help them.

Most people don't know what it is like to stress over learning new, more in-depth standards, master yet another new technology, or feel like a failure when all their hard work results in barely a percentage blip on state assessments.

In the public eye, teachers often swing between being revered and reviled. They are either members of the noblest profession or they are viewed as incompetent and ineffective.

These are simplistic, one-dimensional characterizations. Neither offers a true portrait of what it means to teach. In fact, the two extremes allow the realities of those who teach our children to be glossed over, unsaid and unshared.

Our preconceived notions and assumptions stop us from really knowing the first-year high school special education teacher who deals with students who cannot control their emotions and act out by swearing, throwing things, and sometimes physically harming themselves.

We don't get to meet the teachers who keep snacks in their desks so students don't go hungry, who buy winter coats, hats and mittens for children who come to school cold, or who purchase new shoes for those who can't afford them. Then there are the teachers who often work summers to raise money to help send students on field trips and to sporting events — experiences these students wouldn't otherwise have, if not for the teacher's selfless acts.

We seldom hear about teachers who help students afford the medications they need or who, often anonymously, pay to have heat, electricity or water turned back on for struggling families so their students will have the basics at home.

We miss out on learning about the teacher who regularly helps students' families read their mail because they cannot read well enough to understand it.

Or the teacher who logs 50 hours in one nine-week period volunteering time after school so that students can have the experience of being part of a drama production.

Yet, all of these teachers are real — dedicated, compassionate professionals who want the best for their students.

Few, however, take the time to learn what teachers really do and what is happening in their classrooms. Teachers ignite the spark of learning in children. They inspire, encourage and support our children. Great teachers don't see students for what they can't do, but help them discover what they can do.

If all the current critics of public education spent just one day with a teacher in a classroom, they would learn the truth about our public education system, the progress our students are making and the dedication and professionalism of our teachers.

Too often we think we know what teachers do and what they need to do better. But we don't really know unless we listen to those who know — those who teach.

Teachers educate our children, but they also have much to teach all of us about what is happening in our schools. Let's take the time to not only thank them, but also talk with them and to listen to what they have to say.

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