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No Teacher Is an Island

By Christine Emmons

The current educational climate seems riddled with blame, especially the blaming of teachers. Teacher-bashing is very much in fashion.

We dissect the qualifications of teachers. We examine educators microscopically to judge who is "highly qualified" and who is not. We demand competency in content areas. We require rigorous state certification. We expect continuous improvement. And yet many of us, including many policymakers, do not consider the psychosocial climate in which teachers function, nor do we regularly examine the type and level of support that teachers need in order to function well.

What do I mean by the psychosocial climate?

Teachers do not operate in a vacuum. The environment in which they work impacts their perception of their own level of competence. Having the support of peers, principals, and central-office administrators has an impact on how well they believe they can perform.

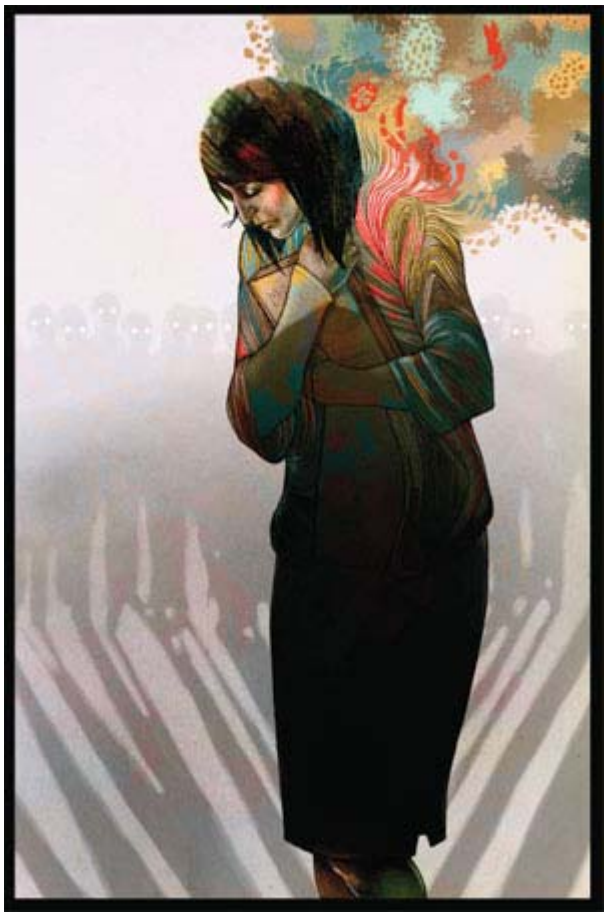
When we paint teachers with the broad brush of ineffectiveness and incompetence, it creates an anti-teacher climate to which parents and students contribute. The prevailing sentiment that anyone can do the job of a teacher, or that anyone can direct teachers how to do their job, is ill-considered: Many have tried, and many have failed.

Teachers do not leave college knowing how to be great teachers, despite their many internships and student-teaching experiences. Skill and competence are built through experience, effective mentoring, and relevant professional development. What matters is that teachers know that their peers, principal, and central-office administrators support them professionally so that they can perform in a climate of physical and psychological safety. Teachers need a well-articulated mission defined by clear and consistent goals, adequate resources and tools to achieve those goals, a community of learning where they can hone and share their skills, and the respect of colleagues, policymakers, and the general public.

Frequently changing and sometimes conflicting federal and state mandates—the various iterations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; the calls for curriculum standards, instructional programs, and tougher teacher evaluations; and the struggle over school management and governance—create pressure at the district level. The district passes these pressures on to school administrators, who pass them down to teachers, who must respond to the pressures in their classrooms—sometimes without a clear directive on how to do so.

The numerous and often-changing expectations, particularly coming from the district, can feel as if they arise without rationale. Teachers can end up working with canned instructional programs that are not adequately evaluated and where results are expected too quickly. District or school administrators can change an instructional program before teachers have had a chance to test it or before it's had a chance to succeed. And then there are the instances when these administrators tell teachers to stop using instructional strategies that work, in order to pursue the latest fad.

These frequent switches from one trend to another create instability detrimental to student learning. They also create a lack of pedagogical and content continuity from one grade to another, which also contributes to a feeling of unpredictability in the classroom. A predictable climate is important for establishing norms and procedures that promote student psychosocial well-being and pro-social behaviors—teaching children to care about the welfare and rights of others—as well as academic achievement.



—Robbie Lawrence

In addition, there is no clear, consistent, and coherent theoretical framework that serves as a filter and organizer of these demands on teachers, adding to their frustration and feelings of inadequacy. To do what they believe is the best for their students, teachers sometimes ignore problematic directives, knowing that "this (each successive reform) too shall pass."

Most teachers do their best to implement district demands, but when programs fail, or are terminated too quickly, teachers can take the heat for student failure. This puts teachers in a tough spot: If they do not follow the rules, they are deemed in noncompliance. If they do follow the rules, but the students, for example, score poorly on the achievement tests, the teachers are labeled ineffective.

If we don't give teachers the freedom and the authority to follow what they view as best practices, how can they be held accountable for the results?

It is true that some teachers are ineffective and others are probably just marking time until retirement. And it is true that there are teachers for whom the profession is not a good match, and others who are burnt out. For these educators, alternative employment might be the solution. We do not want to tamper with the lives of students or their well-being when both are at stake. However, I believe that most teachers want to

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do a good job and can do a good job with the right professional development and support.

Teachers must also be aware of their own behavior. They need to take responsibility for their performance and work to engage their students in the classroom. It is important that teachers avoid the pitfall of blaming parents or the circumstances in which their students live. Expert educators know that an adversarial and fault-finding stance toward parents is counterproductive. They understand that they need to see parents as partners in their children's education.

As teachers experience the pressures to perform, they must also be aware of their stress and avoid becoming dismissive or uncaring toward their students. When joy is wrung out of learning, leaving only chores, antisocial behaviors escalate and learning decreases. Through our attitudes and behavior toward teachers, each of us contributes in some way to the psychosocial environment in which teachers function, so let us build a strong support structure on which teachers can stand so they can lift our children to reach for the stars.

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