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Award-Winning Educator Decries Current Teaching Climate

Awardee criticizes common core, tests

By **Jordan Moeny**

An influential language arts educator who recently won a high-profile international prize for teaching had some surprising advice for young people interested in becoming public school teachers today: Don't do it.

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The profession has been severely "constrained" by the implementation of the Common Core State Standards and schools' emphasis on standardized testing, Nancie Atwell, who **won the first \$1 million Global Teacher Prize** on March 15, said in an interview on CNN.

The award, given by the Varkey Foundation in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, was created to improve the public image of the teaching profession by bringing recognition to the work of outstanding teachers. Boasting an illustrious panel of judges from across the education and business communities, the program has been lauded by the likes of Microsoft co-founder **Bill Gates** and former President Bill Clinton, who is the honorary chair of the Varkey Foundation.

Mr. Gates appeared in a congratulatory video for the award's finalists in which he spoke of the "power of teachers to transform students' lives."

Upon receiving the award, Ms. Atwell, who teaches at the Center for Teaching and Learning, a nonprofit independent K-8 school in Edgecomb, Maine, said that teaching is a privileged and powerful profession and that she felt "validated every day just by the experiences I have with children in the classroom." She also said she plans to donate the full amount of the prize money to her school, which she founded in 1990.

But since being honored, she has sounded less than enthusiastic about the current prospects for teachers. Following the award ceremony, Ms. Atwell **appeared on CNN's "New Day" program** to discuss the honor. When asked what she would tell students considering a career in teaching, she said that she would try to dissuade them unless they were interested in working in a private school.

"Public school teachers are so constrained right now by the common-core standards and the tests that are developed to monitor what teachers are doing with them, ..." she said. "If you're a

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creative, smart young person, I don't think this is the time to go into teaching unless an independent school would suit you."

In **an interview with HuffPost Live** on March 17, Ms. Atwell reiterated her concerns about the common core, which Mr. Gates' foundation has played a central role in supporting. (The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation also helps support *Education Week's* coverage of the implementation of college- and career-ready standards.)

"The new common-core curriculum and the tests that accompany it are tending to treat teachers as mere technicians," she said. "They open the box, and they read the script, and that's not what good teaching is about. It's an intellectual enterprise, and that's been stripped from it by the current climate."

Strong Reactions

She compared the current accountability demands on teachers to "straitjackets when it comes to how [teachers] interact with kids. ..."

Ms. Atwell, who is the author of several prominent books on middle-grades language arts instruction and frequently speaks at professional conferences, added that schools' emphasis on test preparation leaves little room for teachers to convey the true benefits of reading and writing.

"It's just become a series of rig—not even rigorous—almost ridiculous exercises that don't have any connection with the enjoyment of stories or the exercise of self-expression," she said.

On the Internet, educators voiced strong reactions to Ms. Atwell's comments. Many praised her for going public with hard truths about the profession that reflected their own experiences. Others argued that she had misinterpreted the intentions of the common core and that discouraging potential teachers is the wrong way to change education policy.

Dan Brown, a former teacher who is now the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based Future Educators Association, agreed with the latter group.

"Nancie Atwell is an exceptional educator, but her statements discouraging creative, smart young people from pursuing careers in public schools are counterproductive," Mr. Brown said in an email. "We can't give up the ship in frustration; what happened to 'Be the change'?"

In a subsequent emailed statement provided through the Varkey Foundation, Ms. Atwell walked back slightly on her position.

"Teaching has been my pride and pleasure for more than four decades. I encourage anyone anywhere who enjoys working with young people to consider it as a career," she said. "The world needs all the smart, passionate educators it can get."

But, she said, she had wanted to be honest about the challenges teachers face today.

"In U.S. public schools, these include a tight focus on standardized tests and methods, which I feel discourage autonomy and encourage teaching to the test...", she wrote. "And I empathize with

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aspiring teachers and I strongly believe that they need to be aware of and prepared for the particular challenges of the current climate."

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