

## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 4, 2011

Published in Print: October 5, 2011, as **In Praise of Teachers**

### COMMENTARY

## In Praise of Teachers

By **Jeffrey O. Newport**

I stepped outside the other morning, coffee cup in hand, to pick up the newspaper. The neighborhood kids were standing on the corner with their anxious mothers, excitedly awaiting the bus for the first day of school. It caused me to reflect on my history as a student and as an educator.

In 1963, I was 13 and attending Whatcom Junior High School in Bellingham, Wash. One afternoon, after a tough day in Mr. Roberts' math class, I was lounging at home, watching cartoons, snacking on crackers and peanut butter. Mom walked in. Mom was a 2nd grade teacher. She dropped her bags on the floor and slumped into a chair beside me. Being 13, and therefore a genius, I said to her, "Why are you so tired? You're a teacher." Mom didn't say a word.

Fifteen years later, my wife had just given birth to our first daughter. Mom and Dad came to visit us in Vancouver, Wash.; Mom was now retired after 30 years of teaching. It was September, early in the school year. I was a 6th grade teacher new to the profession. I walked into the house that afternoon, dropped my backpack on the floor, groaned, and slumped into a chair. Mom looked at me and said, "It's not that easy, is it?" She had never forgotten.

In June, I ended my 33rd year as a public educator, teacher, and principal. When I was 13, I didn't have any understanding of the scope of the work of teachers. I do now, and, importantly, the work today is very different from when Mom and I were in the classroom. Jamie Vollmer's August 31 **Commentary** in *Education Week* pointed out that teachers are often vilified but rarely praised. Much of the vilification and lack of frequent applause is due to the simple fact that many do not understand the nature of the work and the range of responsibilities that teachers face today. I'd like to offer some words in praise of teachers and the incredible work that so many of them do each day on behalf of children, families, and communities.

Good teaching, the type that we see in a majority of our schools and classrooms, is hard work; great teaching, of which there is plenty, is incredibly difficult. Good teaching is physically, intellectually, and emotionally demanding. Great teaching is all of these and much more.

The physical demands of daily life in the classroom can take a toll on a teacher's health and wellness. One recent article suggests that teachers have a greater prevalence of physical health

[← Back to Story](#)



problems than others. The day starts early, well before students arrive (check the school parking lot at 7:30 a.m.) and often ends late in the evening (look again at 5:30 p.m.). Good teachers spend the majority of their day on their feet, moving from kid to kid, listening, applauding, helping. On some days, there may be no bathroom breaks all morning, or afternoon. Many teachers scurry into the lunchroom, grab their meals from the fridge, and head back to the classroom to meet with colleagues or to work with a small group of children. Professional meetings are held each week, often before the day starts and frequently at the day's end. Good teachers communicate regularly with parents, some each day by email, phone, or meetings, all in support of the parents' child. Most teachers leave the school in the late afternoon packing a bag filled with the evening's work—papers to correct, lessons to prepare, newsletters to write. Sunday afternoons are often devoted to the next week's planning and preparation.

The intellectual demands placed upon teachers today are often overwhelming. New curriculum is added each year, requiring initial training, ongoing professional development, and continuing study to become familiar with the materials and content. Study of the professional literature is part of the daily lives of good teachers. The knowledge base specific to high-quality instruction grows constantly. Teachers work diligently, passionately, to "differentiate," which involves specific plans to meet the wide range of needs of all children in each lesson—those with special needs, those in gifted programs, those on the autism spectrum, and those who need coaxing to do the best of which they are capable. Techniques for assessing students' understanding are both formal and informal. Good teachers collect information during their lessons through observations and note-taking in addition to the review and scoring of student work. Often, this data is collated in a systematic fashion at day's end in preparation for the next day's lessons and for reporting to parents. New technology is added each year in classrooms. For young teachers who have grown up as techies, this is an easy, enjoyable part of the job. For those from my generation it can be both challenging and frustrating and, certainly, time-consuming.

Many teachers work in schools that serve students and families who speak a range of languages. Some of these teachers study and learn to communicate with the family in their home language. Teachers new to the profession are required to participate in the professional-certification process. Teachers find the process to be rewarding and to enhance their development as teachers, but it is time-intensive, involving classes both on evenings and weekends. These folks often come into school on Monday morning exhausted.

**"Good teaching is physically, intellectually, and emotionally demanding. Great teaching is all of these and much more."**

Good teachers often choose to pursue certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a rigorous process in which they must prepare and submit detailed portfolios of their work along with videotapes of their instruction to be evaluated by board personnel. They must then pass a rigorous three-hour examination. Some achieve certification on their first try. Others don't, but immediately begin the process again the following year.

Many of the emotional challenges that face teachers are also faced by others—a fender-bender on the way to school; a daughter or son who becomes ill early in the morning of a workday; a parent, often far away, in declining health—personal and often very significant health issues.

But some challenges are not part of the daily lives of those in other professions. A child who comes to school after being beaten the previous night. A young girl who comes to school on a cold, rainy morning in a shirt without a coat, hat, or mittens. A boy who shows up and has not had breakfast that morning or dinner the previous evening. A mother who comes into the classroom scared and crying, fearful of her boyfriend, seeking help and support. A father who comes in and shares that he has just been diagnosed with cancer. These issues confront teachers each day in many schools. Good teachers respond with deep care and concern, comforting the child and the parent. Great teachers become effective advocates for the family, immediately and successfully seeking help and support from various community resources. Then the teacher goes home, sad and weary, but returns in the morning with great spirit, prepared for the next day's challenges. Today, this is the job of being a teacher.

The most important work in public education occurs in the classroom between teachers and kids. It's not easy work. Give teachers a pat on the back, write them a note (they'll post it on their refrigerators at home), bring them a cup of coffee one morning. They'll appreciate it. And they deserve it.

---

*Jeffrey O. Newport retired this year after 33 years in public education. During his career, he served as a classroom teacher, a staff-development specialist, and an elementary school principal.*

Vol. 31, Issue 06, Pages 18-19