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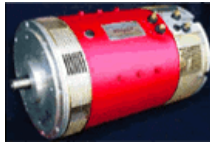
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# Calculus of education more than just scores

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Ann Marie Barth, a kindergarten teacher at North College Hill, meets with parents prior to the school year's start. / Tony Tribble for the Enquirer



Written by Krista Ramsey

FILED UNDER

Columnists

Thursday morning there was something productive, effective, reflective and connective going on in the auditorium of North College Hill High School that will never be captured on an Ohio School Report Card.



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Krista Ramsey  
Teachers

It was the first day of the new school year for the district's 150 staff members. Their joy, dedication and earnest commitment – in the face of great need – were inspiring and humbling to behold.

To be honest, North College Hill City Schools is not the golden child of Ohio public school districts. State legislators don't stop by and look around so they can drop its name in their speeches. Teams from other schools don't tour to try to steal North College Hill's secrets. While other districts throw themselves pep rallies for being rated Excellent with Distinction, North College Hill teeters between Effective and Continuous Improvement.

But maybe there should be a Continuous Improvement with Distinction.

Maybe the North College Hills of the school-world could teach us about areas of performance we accountability addicts don't have the instruments – or perhaps the moral courage – to measure.

How, for example, do you factor in the kind of commitment that leads modestly paid staff members to reach into their own pockets to finance their students' future educations?

Every year, North College Hill staff – everyone from teachers to secretaries and aides – sign up for payroll deductions to contribute to a scholarship fund for their graduates. Thursday, on their first day back, the staff committed \$9,000 to the fund.

This from teachers whose beginning salary is \$35,000 and whose average salary is \$56,500 and from classified workers who mostly make less than \$25,000 a year.

A teacher pointed out that this year's scholarship recipients wanted to be there to say thank you, but they were working full-time jobs and couldn't afford to be away.

Staff members nodded their understanding. In North College Hill, you just learn how to stretch a dollar.

To that point: There is only one district-supplied cellular phone (it goes to a maintenance worker). Principals, central-office staff and even the superintendent use personal cellphones for district business.

When staff members need to replace textbooks, they *always* begin by checking with used book companies. They scout for used equipment on DonorsChoose.org.

Discretionary money is so scare that no building or department has

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its own budget. Every purchase must be requested and approved by both the treasurer and superintendent.

Central-office positions taken for granted in most districts – maintenance supervisor, communications director – don't exist in North College Hill.

While parents in other districts protest elementary class sizes of 25, K-8 classes at North College Hill average almost 30.

And Thursday, in a cheerfully resigned and collaborative tone, Superintendent Gary Gellert asked teachers to turn off classroom lights as often as they could. "Energy is one of the few places left to save money," he said. "You may get an email, 'No lights on Thursday.'"

No one groaned.

No one even flinched.

"This is just the way it is here," Gellert said.

Always has been. His predecessor as superintendent, Stan Wernz, used to take electric typewriters and overhead projectors home and fix them in his basement.

In the last 23 years, North College Hill has passed one operating levy – 3.9-mills in 2005.

When asked for examples of things that have been cut or never existed, he said, "We don't even know what we don't have."

Which makes what North College Hill *does* have seem that much more poignant.

Thursday, the North College Hill staff filed into the high-school gym with smiles, hugs and optimism. They applauded their students' achievements. They cheered for staff members as awards were handed out for years of service.

And on the way up to receive their awards, they shook hands with each other.

To a reporter fortunate enough to sit in on the meeting, many proudly pointed out that they were also North College Hill grads.

Congratulated for winning a staff award voted on by students, language arts teacher Kristen Brown said, "Really, it's the kids who keep us going – we have such great kids."

And in the parking lot after the opening meeting, school board president Ron Harmon – who graduated from North College Hill High School in 1956 and has served on the board for 31 years –

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said with unmistakable pride and undisguised gratitude, "We are just so lucky to be here."

Achievement indicators and Performance Index Calculations will never completely capture the measure of a school district.

Districts like North College Hill add up to more than their scores.

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