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In Honor of Teachers

By CHARLES M. BLOW

Since it's back-to-school season across the country, I wanted to celebrate a group that is often maligned: teachers. Like so many others, it was a teacher who changed the direction of my life, and to whom I'm forever indebted.

[A Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll](#) released this week found that 76 percent of Americans believed that high-achieving high school students should later be recruited to become teachers, and 67 percent of respondents said that they would like to have a child of their own take up teaching in the public schools as a career.

But how do we expect to entice the best and brightest to become teachers when we keep tearing the profession down? We take the people who so desperately want to make a difference that they enter a field where they know that they'll be overworked and underpaid, and we scapegoat them as the cause of a societywide failure.

[A March report](#) by the McGraw-Hill Research Foundation and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that one of the differences between the United States and countries with high-performing school systems was: "The teaching profession in the U.S. does not have the same high status as it once did, nor does it compare with the status teachers enjoy in the world's best-performing economies."

The report highlights two examples of this diminished status:

- "According to a 2005 National Education Association report, nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years teaching; they cite poor working conditions and low pay as the chief reason."
- "High school teachers in the U.S. work longer hours (approximately 50 hours, according to the N.E.A.), and yet the U.S. devotes a far lower proportion than the average O.E.C.D. country does to teacher salaries."

Take Wisconsin, for instance, where [a new law](#) stripped teachers of collective bargaining rights and forced them to pay more for benefits. According to documents obtained by The Associated Press, "about twice as many public schoolteachers decided to hang it up in the first half of this year as in each of the past two full years."

I'm not saying that we shouldn't seek to reform our education system. We should, and we must. Nor am I saying that all teachers are great teachers. They aren't. But let's be honest: No profession is full of peak performers. At least this one is infused with nobility.

And we as parents, and as a society at large, must also acknowledge our shortcomings and the enormous hurdles that teachers must often clear to reach a child. Teachers may be the biggest in-school factor, but there are many out-of-school factors that weigh heavily on performance, like growing child poverty, hunger, homelessness, home and neighborhood instability, adult role-modeling and parental pressure and expectations.

The first teacher to clear those hurdles in my life was Mrs. Thomas.

From the first through third grades, I went to school in a neighboring town because it was the school where my mother got her first teaching job. I was not a great student. I was slipping in and out of depression from a tumultuous family life that included the recent divorce of my parents. I began to grow invisible. My teachers didn't seem to see me nor I them. (To this day, I can't remember any of their names.)

My work began to suffer so much that I was temporarily placed in the "slow" class. No one even talked to me about it. They just sent a note. I didn't believe that I was slow, but I began to live down to their expectations.

When I entered the fourth grade, my mother got a teaching job in our hometown and I came back to my hometown school. I was placed in Mrs. Thomas's class.

There I was, a little nothing of a boy, lost and slumped, flickering in and out of being.

She was a pint-sized firecracker of a woman, with short curly hair, big round glasses set wider than her face, and a thin slit of a mouth that she kept well-lined with red lipstick.

On the first day of class, she gave us a math quiz. Maybe it was the nervousness of being the "new kid," but I quickly jotted down the answers and turned in the test — first.

"Whoa! That was quick. Blow, we're going to call you Speedy Gonzales." She said it with a broad approving smile, and the kind of eyes that warmed you on the inside.

She put her arm around me and pulled me close while she graded my paper with the other hand. I got a couple wrong, but most of them right.

I couldn't remember a teacher ever smiling with approval, or putting their hand around me, or praising my performance in any way.

It was the first time that I felt a teacher cared about me, saw me or believed in me. It lit a fire in me. I never got a bad grade again. I figured that Mrs. Thomas would always be able to see me if I always shined. I always wanted to make her as proud of me as she seemed to be that day. And, she always was.

In high school, the district sent a man to test our I.Q.'s. Turns out that not only was I not slow, but mine and another boy's I.Q. were high enough that they created a gifted-and-talented class just for the two of us with our own teacher who came to our school once a week. I went on to graduate as the valedictorian of my class.

And all of that was because of Mrs. Thomas, the firecracker of a teacher who first saw me and smiled with the smile that warmed me on the inside.

So to all of the Mrs. Thomases out there, all the teachers struggling to reach lost children like I was once, I just want to say thank you. You deserve our admiration, not our contempt.

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