

Sadly, the news from the teaching front isn't good

By Kay McSpadden

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Nadia Zonariri is leaving public education. A successful Advanced Placement World History teacher at Miami Beach Senior High School and a mentor teacher for Miami-Dade County, Zonariri is calling it quits after nine years.

Not because her high school is a challenging urban school with a mix of students – although it is. And not because her classes are overcrowded – although they are.

Zonariri is leaving public education because next year Florida will require public school teachers to be evaluated on a value added model, a methodology that has a margin of error as high as 66 points.

“Teachers are ranked on a curve, thus a certain percentage will always be considered failures,” Zonariri writes in Edweek. “I will not let myself be labeled an ‘ineffective’ teacher after continuously striving to improve my instruction, my knowledge base, my relationship with my students and parents. I will not be labeled an ineffective teacher after spending hours on the phone, in person and over email contacting parents over skipping students, sick students, struggling students, amazing students... I will not be labeled an ineffective teacher after spending hours on my weekends and evenings grading student papers when I should be reading to my own young children.

“It has reached the point where I know that I will inevitably wind up a loser, no matter how hard I work... I am a proud product of public schools from elementary to university, but the policies imposed in recent years by politicians are destroying the same system politicians claim to be saving.”

Zonariri's comments were published a few days after the most recent MetLife survey about teacher satisfaction was released. I've been in the classroom since 1977 and the results didn't surprise me. Beaten down by a recession that has hit education hard with budget cuts, layoffs, and furloughs, and perhaps more importantly, by the scapegoating of teachers in the public discourse, teachers report the lowest level of satisfaction with the profession in over 20 years. A third of teachers plan to leave within the next five years.

Interestingly enough, the results were stable regardless of where the teachers worked, the kinds of students they taught, or how long they had been teachers.

During my career, it's never been harder to be a teacher in America.

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This week I was invited to meet with my district's first-year teachers for part of their induction and professional development. They have been reading "Notes from a Classroom," a book I published in 2007 that includes many essays about education, and they had prepared a list of questions for me.

First they told me their stories. One elementary guidance counselor wanted ways to help her students broaden their horizons, to resist the temptation to "think small" about their futures. A high school guidance counselor wept when he recalled a gifted soccer player who is now serving time in prison.

A music teacher wanted to know how to deal with an emotionally disturbed youngster who is sabotaging his performance ensemble. A PE teacher wanted advice on how to channel the high energy of his 7th and 8th graders into meaningful class discussions.

One teacher is being bullied by a parent. Another teacher is being bullied by a disruptive group of students. A 4th-grade teacher worries about her students with disabilities, and the teacher who works in an alternative school worries about the multiple challenges her students face.

These first-year teachers were tired, and they wanted answers. Here I was, someone who's written a book. What could I do to help?

It wasn't a moment of epic fail, but it was close. In an hour I could do little more than listen and commiserate, offering small suggestions around the edges of the problems that loom large throughout their days.

"I've survived," I said, "and you will, too."

At least I hope that's true. The news from the front isn't so good right now. It's far too easy to blame teachers rather than address the systemic social and economic stresses that hobble our students and keep them from being successful.

As we walked out of the meeting, one of the teachers – a former student – leaned toward me and said, "Every day I try to teach like you."

It was an unlooked for gift – her tribute to class discussions and long nights reading difficult assignments, essays rewritten until they were error-free, and above all, the fun of exploring through questions, the pleasure of finding things out.

Nothing unusual – just the kind of learning going on in classrooms everywhere, every day.

The kind of learning increasingly at risk as good teachers flee the profession and new teachers question whether or not to stay.

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