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LIFE & CULTURE

The Tough Decision to Leave the Classroom

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As the title of this post suggests, I have made the tough decision to leave the classroom for good at the end of this school year.

The decision is a painful one — both personally and professionally. It is also a public one, as I've been honored as recently as last month by the Waynesboro Rotary Club as its 2014 High School Teacher of the Year, my fourth such honor in six years.

In that respect, I feel an explanation is in order, as well as a prescription for what we — as a community — can do to right the ship.

Every workplace has its imperfections and challenges. I accept that. But public education is painted as a career where you make a difference in the lives of students. When a system becomes so deeply flawed that students suffer and good teachers leave (or become jaded), we must examine how and why we do things.

Waynesboro is small enough that we can tackle some of the larger problems that other school systems can't. I want this piece, in part, to force a needed, collective conversation.

In doing so, I don't want to come across as prideful or arrogant. I simply want my neighbors and friends to understand the frustrations at issue and what's at stake for the next round of teachers and students.

When I came to this area in 2008, I believed I would be a teacher for life. My wife and I signed a lease on an apartment we had never seen and arrived only a few days before school started. Words can't really express how excited I was to land a teaching job, work with high school students, and invest in teenagers the way one teacher invested in me.

That first year coincided with the first round of school budget cuts. Salaries were frozen and spending was slashed. This basic storyline has repeated itself for the five years that followed.

Over this time, I've lost my optimism and question a mission I once felt wholly committed to.

I still care deeply about students. I've worked hard to brighten their day while giving them an enjoyable and rigorous environment in which to learn. If this job was just about working with students, I couldn't ask for a better or more meaningful career.

The job, though, is about much more. And I have very real concerns about the sustainability of public education in Waynesboro (and as a whole).

To make a real difference in the lives of students, raise the quality of life in greater Waynesboro, and attract and keep life-changing teachers, we must address five key areas:

1. Tear Down the Hoops

Our teachers spend far too much time jumping through hoops.

Every year, our district invents new goals (such as “21st Century Skills”), measuring sticks (most recently a “Growth Calculator”), time-consuming documentation (see “SMART goals”), modified schedules (think block scheduling and an extended school day), and evaluations (look in our seventy-two page “Teacher Performance Plan”).

As a district, we pretend these are strategic adjustments. They are not. The growth calculator was essentially brought forward out of thin air, SMART goals are a weak attempt to prove we’re actually doing something in the classroom, etc. Bad teachers can game any system; good teachers can lose their focus trying to take new requirements seriously.

These hoops have distracted me from our priority (students). I’ve concluded it’s no longer possible to do all things well. We need to tear down these hoops and succeed clearly on simple metrics that matter.

Over the past six years, I can’t remember a time where something was taken off my plate. Expectations continue to increase and we play along until we invent new hoops.

On a personal level, with 100+ students a year, a growing family, and two side jobs, I can no longer be a good teacher and do all the system expects of me.

2. Have a Plan for the Future

I stepped into the classroom around the time of a major worldwide recession. [As the individuals and institutions responsible for this recession escaped accountability for their actions](#), school districts like ours went into survival mode.

Six years later, we’re still there. We have no plan for the future.

Earlier this year, the school board held its annual budget meeting. I left my second job early to attend and asked board members one simple question: “Is there any cause for optimism?” Each school board member, searching for a silver lining, effectively answered “no” by the time their reasoning caught up with them.

These basic mantras seem to govern what we do:

Just do the best you can.

We need to do more with less.

There’s no money in the budget for that.

We're hoping things look better next year.

I don't fault our district for a worldwide economic downturn. I do fault it for how it's handled it. For six years in a row, we've cut, cut, cut. And for six years in a row, students and teachers have paid the biggest price.

When times are tough, human beings and institutions have the rare opportunity to reflect and refocus, to think differently and creatively. But instead of seizing the opportunity and gathering stakeholders for collective conversations and solution building, we've wandered around aimlessly hoping to make ends meet.

We should have a clear plan for sustainability. Instead, we're really just worried about balancing the budget.

When we have a desperate need like football bleachers that have to be replaced, or turfgrass that isn't up to par, we somehow find the money. We — through public or private avenues — meet those needs. Why can't we find funds to address the areas that seem more pertinent to our primary mission?

3. Scrap Obsession with Flawed Assessments

I've seen teachers cry over Standards of Learning scores. I've seen students cry over SOL scores. I've seen newspaper and TV reports sensationalize SOL scores. These are all indications of an unhealthy obsession with flawed standardized tests.

SOL tests are inherently unfair, but we continue to invest countless hours and resources in our quest for our school to score well. This leads me to the following questions:

- Do we care more about student progress or our appearance?
- Why can't we start a movement to walk away from these tests?
- Why can't we shift our focus to critical thinking and relevant educational experiences?

It's tough to acknowledge that people in Washington, D.C., and Richmond (and sometimes decision makers in Waynesboro) develop systems and policies that affect my students and me negatively. But as they retire and sail off into the sunset, we're the ones left with the consequences of ineffective measurements and strategies.

Our new teacher evaluations focus heavily on test scores. But while teachers are continually under pressure to be held accountable, there seems to be very little accountability for parents, the community, or district offices.

It's only going to get worse, and it seems that we have no intention of taking a stand or

advocating against flawed assessments. Instead, we have submitted ourselves to these tools that misrepresent student growth. It is a game, and it is a game I no longer wish to play.

4. Build a Community That Supports Education

Stop by the high school for a sporting event (and I love sports) and you'll be impressed with the attendance and enthusiasm. Stop by the high school on a parent-teacher night and you'll see tumbleweed blowing through the halls.

If parents and local decision-makers really value education (and there is a small portion of the community that does), student and teacher morale would be much different.

Our school and political leaders must help build a community that truly supports education. A real investment from residents across all neighborhoods and groups would change the climate immensely and allow us to truly tackle the challenges that lie ahead.

Unfortunately, the community seems disengaged with such struggles and more concerned with whether or not we'll ever land an Olive Garden.

Until the community boosts its value of education...

- How can we provide high quality to all students?
- How can we build strong academic programs that meet student needs?
- How can we prepare students to be productive citizens?
- How can we successfully partner with parents and others?

If we can't reflect the values of our mission statement, then we need to change our mission statement.

We simply can't move forward when there is such little community connection to our educational goals. And if we can't move forward together, I don't want to tread water alone.

5. Fairly Compensate Educators

Compensation alone has not pushed me away from education. At the same time, the years of salary and step freezes have taken a toll.

If educators are as valuable as we claim they are (our district website says we "strive to hire and retain quality employees"), then we would make sure we take care of employees and their families. We must fairly compensate educators.

Keeping a sixth year teacher on a first year salary is not looking out for someone who looks out for students. For those like me, there's only a \$100 difference in our December 2009 and January 2014 monthly paychecks.

My wife and I live on a very strict budget. We are thankful for the quality of life we enjoy compared to other people in the world and try to keep things in their proper perspective. But the only financial reason I can afford to keep teaching is because of two side businesses and the generosity of family and friends. I'm not the only educator who manages extra work to make ends meet. Here are some efforts we've made to make this job sustainable:

- We lived with one car (a car that was given to us) for 4 ½ years. During that time, I walked or rode my bike to school to save on gas. We recently bought a second car with money I saved from my [web design business](#).
- We rarely eat out and maintain our own garden to cut down on food costs.
- We bought a \$114,000 house that needed lots of work. This kept our mortgage payments in the \$700 range, which is about what it would cost to rent a decent apartment.
- We haven't taken a vacation since I started teaching six years ago.

I love Waynesboro. I'm rooting for Waynesboro's success. But there needs to be real, quantifiable change if we're going to create a bright future for everyone.

A love for students and teaching drove me for the past six years. Now I'm watching my own kids grow up and am starting to think more and more about my own family.

What will I have to show for myself 10 years from now when I've missed crucial time with my own kids to barely break even and exist in a place where educators aren't really valued? What happens when I dedicate my life to a place only to discover I'm part of their 10th round of budget cuts?

We need answers. I hope this can move us one step closer to asking the questions that will get us there.

Josh Waldron