

# The Washington Post [Print](#)

---

## ‘I would love to teach but...’

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: December 31, 2013 at 9:45 am

I recently [published a post](#) with various answers to the question: How hard is teaching? Here is one response I received by e-mail from a veteran seventh-grade language arts teacher in Frederick, Maryland, who asked not to be identified because she fears retaliation at her school. In this piece she describes students who don't want to work, parents who want their children to have high grades no matter what, mindless curriculum and school reformers who insist on trying to quantify things that can't be measured.

Here is her e-mail:

It is with a heavy, frustrated heart that I announce the end of my personal career in education, disappointed and resigned because I believe in learning. I was brought up to believe that education meant exploring new things, experimenting, and broadening horizons. This involved a great deal of messing up. As part of the experimentation that is growing up, I would try something, and I would either succeed or fail. I didn't always get a chance to fix my mistakes, to go back in time and erase my failures, but instead I learned what not to do the next time. Failing grades stood, lumpy pieces of pottery graced the mantle, broken bones got casts. As a result of my education, I not only learned information, I learned to think through my ideas, to try my best every single time; I learned effort. I'd like to say that in some idealistic moment of nostalgia and pride, I decided to become a teacher, but the truth is that I never thought I would do anything else. I come from a long line of teachers and I loved school from day one.

To pursue this calling, I worked hard to earn the title of "classroom teacher," but I became quickly disillusioned when my title of teacher did not in any way reflect my actual job. I realized that I am not permitted to really teach students anything. When I was in middle school, I studied Shakespeare, Chaucer, Poe, Twain, O. Henry, the founding fathers, if you will, of modern literary culture. Now, I was called to drag them through shallow activities that measured meaningless but "measurable" objectives.

Forced to abandon my hopes of imparting the same wisdom I had gained through my experiences and education, I resigned myself to the superficial curriculum that encouraged mindless conformity. I decided that if I was going to teach this nonsense, I was at least going to teach it well. I set my expectations high, I kept my classroom structured, I tutored students, I provided extra practice, and I tried to make class fun. At this point, I was feeling alright with myself. I quickly rose through the ranks of "favorite teacher," kept open communication channels with parents, and had many students with solid A's.

It was about this time that I was called down to the principal's office with a terse e-mail that read only, "I need to speak with you." Clueless, I took down my grade sheets, communication logs, lesson plans, and sat down as an adult still summoned down to the principal's office. "I need to talk to you about these students." She handed me a list of about 10 students, all of whom had D's or F's. At the time, I only had about 120 students, so I was relatively on par with a standard bell curve. As she brought up each one, I walked her through my grade sheets that showed not low scores but a failure to turn in work—a lack of responsibility. I showed her my tutoring logs, my letters to parents, only to be interrogated further. Eventually, the meeting came down to two quotes that I will forever remember as the defining slogans for public education:

"They are not allowed to fail."

"If they have D's or F's, there is something that you are not doing for them."

What am I not doing for them? I suppose I was not giving them the answers, I was not physically picking up their hands to write for them, I was not following them home each night to make sure they did their work on time, I was not excusing their lack of discipline, I was not going back in time and raising them from birth, but I could do none of these things. I was called down to the principal's office many more times before I was broken, before I ended up assigning stupid assignments for large amounts of credit, ones I knew I could get students to do. Even then, I still had students failing, purely through their own refusal to put any sort of effort into anything, and I had lowered the bar so much that it took hardly anything to pass. According to the rubrics set forth by the county, if they wrote a single word on their paper, related or not to the assignment, I had to give them a 48 percent. Yet, students chose to do nothing. Why? Because we are forced to pass them. "They are not allowed to fail," remember? Teachers are held to impossible standards, and students are accountable for hardly any part of their own education and are incapable of failing. I learned quickly that if I graded students accurately on their poor performance, then I have failed, not them. The attention is turned on me, the teacher, who is criticized, evaluated, and penalized for the fleeting wills of adolescents.

Everyone received at least a C that year—not earned, received—and I was commended for my efforts. In the time to follow, I gave up. I taught the bare minimum and didn't feel like my students learned anything of value, but they all got good grades. I got frequent praise for being such a "good teacher." It made me physically ill. These empty words were in no way reflective of my capabilities as a genuine instructor nor the true capabilities of my students, but rather, they were akin to the praise you give a beloved pet: you did what you were told, "good teacher."

Despite this guilt of success, I was constantly prodded both inside the classroom and out by condescending remarks like, "It must be nice to have all that time off." Time off? Did they mean the five or less hours of sleep I got each night between bouts of grading and planning? Did they mean the hours I spent checking my hundreds of e-mails, having to justify myself to parents, bosses, and random members of the community at large? Did they mean the time I missed with my family because I had to get all 150 of these essays graded and the data entered into a meaningless table to be analyzed for further instruction and evidence of my own worth? Did they mean the nine months of 80-hour work weeks, 40 of which were unpaid overtime weekly,

only to be forced into a two-month, unpaid furlough during which I'm demeaned by the cashier at Staples for "all that time off?"

I continued to wrinkle through the sludge because I wanted to believe that it would get better, and for a brief moment, it did. I got a new administrator who preached high standards and accountability, and I decided to try to hold my students to a standard once again. Combined with a brand-new curriculum that I had to learn basically overnight, I took the chance to set the bar high, especially when it came to the gifted and talented program. I was now teaching these "highly able learners," and all of the training I received told me to challenge them, push them, take a step back in order to "tap the genius inside our schools." So, I did. I created an intense environment that required students' best work. I created opportunities for students to rise to the challenge. I provided choice and tapped creativity. And I required that students take ownership of their work and be proud of genuine effort. I felt like a "good teacher" then.

However, as the whipping boy for society's ills, I could do none of these things. I was lambasted by parents as being ineffective because their child had a B or a C. "S/he has always been an A student," they screamed at me during frequent meetings. "How dare you give them a B?" Give them? Give them? In my silly attempts to assign grades based on what students earned according to the rubrics I was given and the high standards I set forth for student achievement, I was told that "I will not accept a grade of 50% because my student did not turn in an assignment on time."

I wanted to tell them to tell their child, then. Tell Johnny that you will not accept his lack of responsibility, and quell any of his excuses. The reality however, is that I had to apologize, hang my head, and give Johnny another chance to earn additional credit, as if that will somehow benefit him in the real world. Johnny planned poorly, and it somehow became my fault. I thought back to my new administration's stock phrase that had initially given me a glimmer of hope, "We're not in the business of changing grades." Although I heard these words a lot, each time parents complained enough, I ended up having to change grades. I was confused. To me, this was akin to going to a hardware store and demanding that they make me a cake. They would try to tell me that cake baking wasn't their business, but I would scream and be nasty over and over until I got that cake. If this scenario were to really happen, would that hardware store bake me a cake? Probably not. They would most likely call the police and ban me from the premises. So if we accept that modern education is a business (a modern tragedy) and that our business is not changing grades, why am I expected to cave to the insane ravings of confused and misguided consumers?

I thought back to my own education, incredulous. Had I dropped the ball, my parents would have been wildly disappointed in me and apologized to the teacher, and I would have learned what not to do next time. However, education has abandoned us. Some may want to believe that my incredulity stems from defensiveness, a sort of "this wouldn't have worked for me, so it's only fair that it doesn't work for you" because this is an easier truth for deluded people to accept. The real truth is that I wouldn't have changed my failures for the world because I learned something, really learned something, and I always believed that part of my job was to help students learn things. We cannot concern ourselves so much with "fair." As the old adage goes, "life isn't fair," and education should prepare students for life. Life may not be fair, but it

is predictable in a statistically significant way; success generally follows hard work, doing something is typically more effective than doing nothing, and asking questions leads to answers. But remember, just because I am a teacher does not mean that my job is to help students learn things of value.

My job is to be debased by an inescapable environment of distrust which insists that teachers cannot be permitted to create and administer their own tests and quizzes, now called "assessments," or grade their own students' work appropriately. The development of plans, choice of content, and the texts to be used are increasingly expected to be shared by all teachers in a given subject. In a world where I am constantly instructed to "differentiate" my methods, I am condemned for using different resources than those provided because if I do, we are unable to share "data" with the county and the nation at large.

This counter-intuitive methodology smothers creativity, it restricts students' critical thinking, and assumes a one-size-fits-all attitude that contradicts the message teachers receive. Teacher planning time has been so swallowed by the constant demand to prove our worth to the domination of oppressive teacher evaluation methods that there is little time for us to carefully analyze student work, conduct our own research, genuinely better ourselves through independent study instead of the generic mandated developments, or talk informally with our co-workers about intellectual pursuits. For a field that touts individuality and differentiation, we are forced to lump students together as we prepare all of these individuals for identical, common assessments. As a profession, we have become increasingly driven by meaningless data points and constant evaluation as opposed to discovery and knowledge.

Originality, experimentation, academic liberty, teacher autonomy, and origination are being strangled in ill-advised efforts to "fix" things that were never broken. If I must prove my worth and my students' learning through the provision of a measurable set of objectives, then I have taught them nothing because things of value cannot be measured. Inventiveness, inquisitiveness, attitude, work ethic, passion, these things cannot be quantified to a meager data point in an endless table of scrutiny.

I am paid to give out gold stars to everyone so that no one feels left out, to give everyone an A because they feel sad if they don't have one. I take the perpetual, insane harassment from parents who insist that their child's failings are solely my fault because I do not coddle them to the point of being unable to accept any sort of critique; if each student is not perfect and prepared for college and life by age twelve, then I must be wrong about the quality of their work. I lower my own standards so much that I have been thinking my grades were generous. After years of being harangued, I gave Bs to D-quality work, but that is never good enough. All I can do is field the various phone calls, meetings, and e-mails, to let myself be abused, slandered, spit at because that is my career, taking the fall for our country's mistakes and skewed priorities. So if you want your child to get an education, then I'm afraid that as a teacher, I can't help you, but feel free to stop by if you want a sticker and a C.

I sample educator Kris Nielson when I say that: I would love to teach, but I refuse to be led by a top-down hierarchy that is completely detached from the classrooms for which it is supposed to be responsible. I cannot integrate any more information about how important it is to differentiate our instruction as we prepare our kids for tests that are anything but differentiated.

In addition, I totally object and refuse to have my performance as an educator rely on “Domain 5.” It is unfair, subjective, and does not reflect anything about the teaching practices of proven educators, rather it is one more vain piece of administrative busywork that I do not have time for.

I would love to teach, but I will not spend another day under the expectations that I prepare every student for the increasing numbers of meaningless tests that take advantage of children for the sake of profit. I refuse to subject students to every ridiculous standardized test that the state and/or district thinks is important. I refuse to have my higher-level and deep thinking lessons disrupted by meaningless assessments (like the Global Scholars test) that do little more than increase stress among children and teachers, waste instructional time and resources, and attempt to guide young adolescents into narrow choices. It is counter-productive to watch my students slouch under the weight of a system that expects them to perform well on tests that do not measure their true abilities, only memorization and application, and therefore do not measure their readiness for the next grade level—much less life, career, or college.

I would love to teach, but I will not spend another day wishing I had some time to plan my fantastic lessons because the county comes up with new and inventive ways to steal that time, under the guise of PLC meetings or whatever. I’ve seen successful PLC development. It doesn’t look like this. I’m far enough behind in my own work that I will not spend another day wondering what menial, administrative task I will hear that I forgot to do next.

I would love to teach, but I will not spend another day in a district where my coworkers are both on autopilot and in survival mode. I am tired of hearing about the miracles my peers are expected to perform, and watching the districts do next to nothing to support or develop them. I haven’t seen real professional development since I got here. The development sessions I have seen are sloppy, shallow, and have no real means of evaluation or accountability. I cannot stand to watch my coworkers being treated like untrustworthy slackers through the overbearing policies of this state, although they are the hardest working and most overloaded people I know. It is gut-wrenching to watch my district’s leadership tell us about the bad news and horrific changes coming towards us, then watch them shrug incompetently, and then tell us to work harder.

I would love to teach, but I’m tired of my increasing and troublesome physical symptoms that come from all this frustration, stress, and sadness.

Finally, I would love to teach, but I’m truly angry that parents put so much stress, fear, and anticipation into their kids’ heads to achieve a meaningless numeric grade that is inconsequential to their future needs, especially since their children’s teachers are being cowed into meeting expectations and standards that are not conducive to their children’s futures.

I quit because I’m tired of being part of the problem, and as only one soul in the river Styx, it is impossible for me to be part of the solution.

Could I be part of the solution? Of course. But no one ever asks the teachers, those who are up to their necks in the trenches each day, or if they do, it is in a patronizing way and our suggestions are readily discarded. Decisions about classrooms should be made in classrooms.

Teachers are the most qualified individuals to determine what is needed for their own students. Each classroom is different. It has a different chemistry, different dynamic, different demographic, and the teacher is the one who keeps the balance. He or she knows each student, knows what they need, and they should be the ones making the decisions about how to best reach them. Sure, using different resources and strategies among schools may make data sharing more difficult, but haven't we gone far enough with data? Each child is not a number or a data point. They can only be compared to the developmental capabilities set forth by medicine, not education, and to their own previous progress.

In addition, teachers cannot and should not be evaluated on the grades of their students. Who then would try to teach the boy who will never progress past third grade due to a brain injury? Who then will teach the girl that refuses to complete any work? Who then would teach any special education classes? What stops me from skewing my grades to keep the world off my back? Education cannot be objectively measured. It never could, and our problems began when we came to that realization and instead of embracing it, decided to force it into a quantifiable box that is much too small and too much the wrong shape.

Teachers are called to teach because they, like me, believe in potential. We are gardeners. We can plant the seeds, water, fertilize, but then we wait. Students don't always grow under our watch; it may not be until years later that something we said or did takes root. As a result, it is impossible to hold teachers accountable for what amounts to students' physical development. I cannot make them grow any faster; I can only provide the foundation for them to grow upon. I can provide opportunities for students to stretch and reach for the sun, I can provide them a scaffold upon which to rest on their way up, but it is up to them to try and it is up to our leaders to support us and our decisions. Like the growth we expect from our students, policy needs to be driven from the ground up, starting with teachers in order to provide the supports we need. How can we be told what we need from those who are not in our position? It is counterintuitive. Let teachers assess the needs of students so that these results can tell us what we need. It is not the place of outsiders to make one-size-fits-all mandates to a world of different shapes and proportions. In doing so, they create an atmosphere where pebbles are polished and diamonds dimmed.

Though I referenced Robert Greene Ingersoll formerly, Clifford Stoll has already addressed our country's educational misgivings in a single sentence: "Data is not information, information is not knowledge, knowledge is not understanding, and understanding is not wisdom." It is time that we fall on our sword. In our rabid pursuit of data and blame, we have sacrificed wisdom and abandoned its fruits. We cannot broaden our students' horizons by placing them and their teachers into narrow boxes, unless we then plan to bury them.