

Behind Every Silver Lining

Wade A. Carpenter

The Other Side of Teacher Leadership

There are no people more obligated and less likely to lead school improvement efforts than teachers. Teachers have to look the kids in the eyes every day—not kids in the abstract, not kids in the third person, not kids in the future tense, but real, live, honest-to-God kids, and that obligates them in ways that theorists, politicians, and innovators may not even understand. Teacher leadership can happen, and I believe it should happen, but it may require major changes in the way educators do business, and I'm not sure anybody's really ready for it.

Teaching is a great calling. But somehow, we have managed to turn a first-rate calling into a third-rate job that hundreds of thousands of bright-eyed young people will find unacceptable. Maybe Socrates and St. Paul were right to begin with: teaching for a living is really a very bad idea. After all, as a vocation—a calling—teaching is incomparable. But as a profession, teaching is marginal, and as a job, in many places it is the pits. Just think of all the ingenious and adventurous things we could do to educate our students if we weren't dependent on our teaching jobs to feed our own children. But we ignored the ancient wisdom, and now find that there are few people less free than those who would free others for a living. Sad, but that is the real world. So can teachers working within the confines of a third-rate job take the lead in making it better? Sadly, political naiveté, society's neglect of its responsibilities, and—believe it or not—good sense makes it almost certain that teachers' voices will be barely heard. Maybe teachers should just do what they are told . . . skillfully.

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The political naiveté of most practicing teachers can be astonishing. The classic example for me occurred a couple of elections ago, when I had a graduate Foundations class of practicing teachers from a small nearby community. By nice coincidence, we went over political theory and practice a few days before the presidential debates. At the next class meeting, they thanked me helping them understand what the candidates were talking about. While I was gratified to have helped, I was also troubled that these good people, who are supposed to be preparing our children for citizenship, should themselves be struggling simply to understand issues and positions at the superficial level of the televised debate. It really wasn't their fault; they had never been taught that material before, and an extremely top-down administration had convinced them of their inefficacy. In fairness to that administration, however, these good people really *were* so ill-informed that holding their hands through major issues really *was* a good idea. And in fairness to the teachers, two years later when I sat on their orals committees, I saw a lot of transformed people. I am also gratified that their new superintendent is much more teacher-friendly. I hope they have the moxie to back him up when he gets into trouble . . . which is only a matter of time.

And I hope they have the time, as well. Another sad reality is that because of what even the most temperate old-timers are increasingly calling a "parental vacuum," teachers nowadays are responsible for raising up to 150 kids per day who would otherwise be feral. Given this parental vacuum, they do not have time to fix the system, even if they had the preparation.

Then there are those administrators who freak out whenever teachers start to make waves. You really can't blame them, either. Administrators have

lots and lots of kids to deal with, any of whom can at any moment commit the most imaginative stupidities. Those kids have parents, nearly all of whom can be counted on to support their little brutes at all costs—especially if it is the teacher who pays the price. And administrators have responsibility for lots and lots of teachers who, even at their most competent, can walk into traps unheard-of in previous generations. Administrators just don't need any more wave-makers. Brutal and clumsy administrators crush teacher initiative, but skillful and cunning ones "encourage" it by "redistributing responsibilities" on them . . . especially those duties that will require lots of committee meetings and paperwork. And the teachers, God bless 'em, usually interpret this as "progress." With progress such as this, teacher empowerment is just not likely to happen.

Finally, regardless of how naive and overloaded teachers might be, they are seldom stupid. First, there are those smart enough to marry money. These may be understandably reluctant to invest much teaching time or emotional capital in political activities that have little personal urgency for them. While it is easy to get frustrated at their apparent apathy toward whatever good causes we may be promoting, let's remember that they are already working a tough job they don't really need, to perform a work of kindness that lots of children really *do* need. They are not necessarily hard-hearted, no matter how frustrating they may be to those who would mobilize them. Secondly, there are those smart enough to leave situations they *ought* to leave: There is no teacher shortage in United States; but there is teacher abuse. In many places, the work conditions are so vile that only the truly hard-core or the truly stupid would dream of staying in. Thirdly, many teachers quit after a few years for the very best of reasons: to raise families. If they can afford it, they stay home. If they must work, they work in jobs that pay better, allow more time for their children, and put less stress on themselves and their families. I hate to say it, but this may be a more valuable service than that performed by those of us who make a career of teaching. It may be better to raise one or two children well than to teach hundreds poorly, and in some schools, rising to the level of mediocrity is an accomplishment.

My assignment for *Educational Horizons* is to "think outside the box"; to give "the other side" of hot issues in a gentle, charitable spirit, and to make whatever positive suggestions my admittedly-odd mind can conceive. But this time I would like to solicit *your* suggestions. (You can contact me through *Educational Horizons*, by e-mail at wcarpenter@berry.edu or my website: <http://fsweb.berry.edu/academic/education/wcarpenter/>)

I am privileged to prepare teachers in a highly regarded liberal arts college, and my kids and my colleagues are extraordinary. Our department's mission is to turn out the 100 best new teachers in our state every year, and all indications are that we're succeeding. Our program provides both liberal and pedagogical preparation for compassion, skill, and toughness. In addition to preparing skilled classroom technicians, we give them a healthy dose of the political awareness and leadership skills that will do them good service several years down the road. Again, we have every reason to be pleased. But what if they aren't even going to be in the job several years down the road? Given the realities of teaching for a living in the 21st century, perhaps our efforts should take a different form. If we can expect our graduates not to be teaching four or five years later, just when their teaching skills have been honed enough for their political consciousness to be aroused, perhaps we should concentrate more exclusively on tricks of the trade. Perhaps it is wrong to demand the high-quality, challenging work that would turn first-class young people into first-class educators when they will not *and should not* stay long in a third-rate job. Some folks would say that's what we should be doing with our limited contact hours anyway: Given the demands upon teachers and the time limitations on teacher educators, maybe we shouldn't even talk about lofty ideals such as "education," but confine ourselves to preparing teachers for schools as they are. We have resisted that mentality so far, but maybe we're wrong. Maybe society should get what it's paying for, parents should get what so many of them deserve, and administrators should get what they seem to want: docile, well-trained short-timers. What should my colleagues and I do? You tell me.