

Who is Failing Whom?



I am the product of the time in NC when we invested in our young people through public education. My grandparents were minimum wage textile workers; none enjoyed the benefit of a high school education. My parents graduated from secondary school but had to get right to work upon graduation. By the time I was in high school, the state of NC was investing in the future. I had the most inspiring, innovative and experienced teachers in public school. They challenged me and made me hungry to be like them – their command of their subject, love of language, excitement about learning and the creativity they brought into the four walls of our classroom was infectious! When I graduated high school, I had great grades but no college fund. Again, NC invested in me. They offered me a full scholarship to UNC-Chapel Hill if I would agree to teach for four years. There was a shift in my mind’s eye – I began watching my teachers from a new perspective. As I began to think about being a teacher, it energized me like nothing else. When I began teaching, the state of NC was still there, ever prodding me to further personal growth and improvement. There were financial incentives to get a master’s degree, and I did. There were financial incentives to get nationally board certified, and I did. Through those experiences, I honed my craft and deepened my subject knowledge; I learned that great teaching was not about what I was doing in the classroom every day. It was about what MY STUDENTS were doing. And for 22 years I have been ever evolving to better meet the needs of my students and to prepare them to be the most productive and capable generation possible.

But, NC is no longer investing in our students and our state. It is evident everywhere my students turn. They hear the dripping from the leaking windows in my trailer when it rains. They feel it in the lightness of their book bags in the first days of school as they have no textbooks to take home. In many schools, there are not even teachers in their classrooms. So many have left, and so few are preparing to enter the profession, that vacancies cannot be filled. There are no scholarships to encourage promising students to become teachers. And veteran teachers are retiring at a fast clip.

The new grading system is being used to convince the public that the public schools are “failing”. The interesting thing about the grades is that they reflect the same inequalities that I see in my classroom. Is it surprising when the student who comes from wealth and privilege achieves and the chronically poor student struggles? No. But do we slap an F on the poor student and publicly embarrass them in the media? Will that inspire that student to improve? No. You offer that child extra help and support, you encourage them, and celebrate every little success along the way to higher achievement. And that is what the state of NC should be doing for our most vulnerable students in our poorest counties. Instead, they took away 6,000 teaching positions, more than 3,000 teacher assistants, cut per pupil spending, gave us a new curriculum but no textbooks or technology, administered one standardized test and declared many of our poorest schools to be “failing”. If I graded my own students this way, providing less and less support and administering one test counting 80% of their grade, I would be, and should be, fired.

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Instead, they are preparing the way for the day when they convince the public to lose faith in our public schools, and start moving their kids to charter and private schools where teachers do not have to be certified, where financial accountability is lacking, and there are profits to be made off of our children.

Public school teachers have been accused of many things in this political climate, but a desire for profit is not one of them. In fact, our teachers are the ONLY state employees in the state that no longer receive longevity pay. And based on the recent uneven pay raises for teachers, I seem to be in the one profession I know of where experience is a liability. Instead of lying about my age, I've started lying about my years of teaching experience.

I wonder if you can even get a young teacher to speak publicly. I at least, for now, have due process rights. I can be fired, but there has to be a reason. My colleagues with less than five years of experience now have no such assurances. They are basically seasonal employees, with no guarantee of having a job in any given year. I wonder if I started teaching today how that single fact would have affected the whole trajectory of my career. Would I have invested my blood, sweat and tears in my school the way I have? Would I have bought the shirt, jackets, shoes, socks and watch in my school's colors? Would I have invested in my students personally, knowing I would be there for years to see them develop? Would I be planning the 20th reunion for the Class of 1995? I don't think so.

And in that, I hope you see how drastically and fundamentally this state legislature is shifting the very foundations the future of our state is built on. It is subtle, and it is complicated to the outside observer, but I want you to hear loud and clear that we are no longer investing in our children the way we should be. And our state will be the worse for it. And that is why it has to stop. Our children are not failing, we are failing our children. Let's stop the unfair grading and start investing in our kids, and our future, again.

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