



Red4EdNC

Administrator Returns to Teaching and Discovers Heartbreaking Reality

Jennifer Lowery
Former Teacher Assistant, Teacher, Asst. Principal
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
May 2016

I was born a teacher. My mom often recalls her memory of being a substitute in the elementary school where my brother and I attended. She walked by my classroom and saw a line of students at my desk waiting for my help. At that point she knew teaching was in my future.

She was right. I worked as a teacher assistant in CMS for two years and then taught elementary grades for five years. I absolutely loved it. Sure, there were afternoons of tears because I was overwhelmed, or tired, or wondering if I was meeting all of the social and academic needs of my students. But I thrived because I had support. I had a teacher assistant, who did time consuming clerical tasks which spared me from spending hours working during my free time. My administration trusted me to use good judgment. Each decision did not require validation with an artifact. Parents supported my classroom, and so did my district. I enjoyed teacher workdays, some with professional development but some with classroom time for me to catch up on so many things that piled up during the week. I was named First Year Teacher of the Year, and I achieved National Board Certification. I wasn't the greatest teacher on the planet, but I was certainly no slouch.

I was accepted and completed my Master's in school administration thanks to the NC Principal Fellows program, and served as an assistant principal for two large CMS high schools. Administration was challenging. Days never went as planned, many hours spent focused on resolving conflict or force-feeding teachers the latest district initiative that I didn't really believe in. I was not a particularly good administrator. I tried to follow the lead of those who seemed to know the right buzzwords, but I did not have the skill or desire of self-promotion. After fulfilling my required years of service, I returned to the classroom.

What a difference five years made. Trust and creativity were replaced with added levels of bureaucracy. Now I had multiple "administrators" to "support" me. I noticed a stronger emphasis on meetings, taking up time during planning that used to be reserved for actually planning lessons or – GASP – take a breather or a bathroom break. With each passing year, the expectations became tougher. With a broken heart, in December 2015 I closed the door on a 17-year career.

Why leave after so many years? It had nothing to do with salary or perks. I was no longer empowered. I was not given true support. My time and expertise were not valued. Every day my planning period was consumed by a meeting. Every single day. And this does not include meetings one or two days a week after school. The last year I taught I did not have duty-free lunch. So this resulted in my coming in an hour or two early, and leaving just as late to get everything done that could not get done during the day. I worked at least 12 hours a day, and many of those hours were intense with the high poverty students I was serving.

All those meetings? Mostly worthless. Analyzing terrible questions and answers to the latest common assessment that was not created by teachers, but by a district person clicking standards from a test bank. Forcing lessons into a template dictated by the school or the zone, without any regard to what I could do on my

own. Justifying parent communication, collaboration with mentees, every single breath that I took had to be documented and validated. I was “rewarded” with a grant that had additional meetings and paperwork attached. Meanwhile I had no time to go to the bathroom during the day.

Despite my test scores being some of the highest in my zone, I was called to task for my lesson plans not matching what was observed. I reminded the administrator of his own requirement – lesson plans written two weeks in advance (so that multiple administrators could review them). But data I had gathered more recently required that I change my plans. I was still chastised for not amending the plans so that administrators, facilitators, intervention specialists, social workers, multi-classroom leaders, discipline administrators, and any other number of “support staff” could see what I was doing at any given moment.

I was supposed to spend hours filling out data trackers with numbers, because numbers have replaced student names, personalities, dreams, and unique qualities. I received direction and mandates from people who had never taught my curriculum or grade level.

Determined to survive, I attempted the bare minimum. I tried to arrive and leave at the bell. But I am a rule-follower and this did not last long. I began to pray for how to make my life better. I could not sustain 13 more years of headaches, clenching my jaw while I slept, high blood pressure, no empowerment and general unhappiness. So I left, in the middle of the year, amid criticism from many who did not understand.

I left behind some fantastic colleagues. They are struggling, even the veterans. Having the summer off (even though many teachers work in some capacity every summer) does not justify piling on work and not giving teachers a moment during the day to regroup. According to NC Policy Watch, teacher turnover in North Carolina was at a five year high in 2014-2015. I have contributed to the 2015-2016 figure and know of several colleagues who have resigned and will add to it as well.

I will always be a teacher at heart. Although my spirit was broken when I left, it was the best decision I have ever made. My quality of life has improved and I don't feel like a failure every day. Unless things change drastically at the state and local levels, my story will become one that is more and more common. It is my hope that by speaking out, voters and decision-makers will wake up and take action, and more “born teachers” will stay, and flourish, in their classrooms.