



Red4EdNC

Open Letter to Fellow NC Public School Teachers – What We Do Cannot Really Be Measured

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Public school teachers,

You can't really be measured.

In fact, those who are measuring you do not have instruments complex enough to really gauge your effectiveness.

If you are a public school teacher in North Carolina, you are always under a bit of a microscope when it comes to accountability. Everybody in the community has a stake in the public education system: students attend schools, parents support efforts, employees hire graduates, and taxpayers help fund buildings and resources.

But there are those who really question the path that public education has taken in North Carolina and lack confidence in our teachers and their ability to mold young people. The countless attacks waged by our General Assembly on public schools is not a secret and part of that is framing teachers as the main culprit in our weakening schools.

Why? Because it is easy to manage data in such a way that what many see is not actually reflective of what happens in schools. For example:

- We have a Jeb Bush school grading system that “failed” schools where wonderful learning is occurring.
- We have lawmakers allowing charter schools to be created with tax payer money without much regulation.

- We have a voucher system that is allowing people to send children to schools that do not even have to teach the same standards as public schools.
- We have virtual charter schools that have loose regulations.
- We have an Achievement School District established even though no real evidence exists in its effectiveness.

Since you are a government employee, your salary is established by a governing body that probably does not have a background in an educational career. The standards of the very curriculum that you must teach may not even be written by educators. And the tests that measure how well your students have achieved are usually constructed by for-profit companies under contract from the state government. Those same tests are probably graded by those very same companies – for a nominal fee of course. And now that we have less money spent per-pupil in this state than we had before the start of the Great Recession, we are demanded to teach more kids in bigger classes with less resources.

There simply is a lot working against us.

However, if anything could be said of the current situation concerning public education in North Carolina it is that teachers have not failed our students. That's because you cannot simply measure students and teachers by numbers and random variables. You measure them by their personal success and growth, and much of that cannot be ascertained by impersonal assessments.

Nor can a teacher's effectiveness truly be measured by "student achievement". There is more, so much more, working within the student/teacher dynamic. Take a look at the definitions of three words often used in our lexicon: "art", "science", and "craft". These definitions come from Merriam-Webster.

1. **Art:** skill acquired by experience, study, or observation
2. **Science:** the state of knowing : knowledge as distinguished from ignorance or misunderstanding
3. **Craft:** skill in planning, making, or executing

Every teacher must display a firm foundation in his or her subject area. However, teaching at its source is an art and a craft. A teacher must marry that knowledge with skill in presenting opportunities for students to not only gain that knowledge but understand how they themselves can apply that knowledge to their own skill set.

There are not many people who are masterfully skillful without having to develop their craft. They do exist, but the term “Master Teacher” is usually given to someone who has a “skill acquired by experience, study, or observation.” That “Master Teacher” has perfected an art form and married it to a science. And most of all, that “Master Teacher” understands the human element.

A good medical doctor just does not deliver medicines and write prescriptions. There must be willingness to listen in order to make a diagnosis and then there is the “bedside manner”. A good lawyer does not just understand and know the law. A good lawyer knows how to apply it for his or her client in unique situations. A master chef doesn’t just follow recipes. A master chef takes what ingredients are available and makes something delectable and nourishing. A great teacher does not just deliver curriculum and apply lesson plans; a great teacher understands different learning styles exist in the same classroom and facilitates learning for each student despite the emotional, psychological, social, mental, and/or physical obstacles that may stand in each student’s path.

How schools and students are measured rarely takes into account that so much more defines the academic and social terrain of a school culture than a standardized test can measure. Why? Because there really is not anything like a standardized student. Experienced teachers understand that because they look at students as individuals who are the sum of their experiences, backgrounds, work ethic, and self-worth. Yet, our General Assembly measures them with the very same criteria across the board with an impersonal test.

Ironically, when a teacher gets a graduate degree in education, it is often defined by the college or university as a Master of Arts like a MAEd or an MAT, not a Master of Science. That’s because teaching deals with people, not numbers. When colleges look at an application of a student, they are more concerned with GPA rather than performance on an EOG or EOCT or NC Final.

And when good teachers look at their own effectiveness in their art and craft, they usually do not let the state dictate their perceptions. They take an honest look at the each student’s growth throughout the year – growth that may never be seen in a school report card or published report.

Like many veteran teachers, I have taught the gambit of academic levels and grades from “low-performing” freshmen to high achieving AP students who have been admitted into the most competitive of colleges and

universities. And while I may take pride in their passing state tests or AP exams, I try and measure my performance by what happens to those students later in life.

- When a student ends a “thank you” card because she felt like she learned something, then I did a good job.
- When a student stops me in the grocery store years after graduating to introduce me to his child, then I made an impression.
- When I read an email from a student in college who sends me a copy of her first English paper that received one of the three “A’s” given out of a hundred students, then I feel good about what I did in the classroom.
- When a student comes to visit me on his break and flat out tells my current students that what I did in class prepared him for college, then I was successful.
- When a former student emails me from half-way around the world to tell me what life is like for her since graduating, then I am validated.
- When a parent comes to you to ask how his/her child could be helped in a matter totally unrelated to academics, then you have made an impression.
- When you speak at a former student’s funeral because that student loved your class, then, well that’s just hard to put into words.

None of those aforementioned items could ever be measured by a test. Students do not remember questions on an EOCT or an EOG or an NC Final or a quarter test. They remember your name and how they felt in your class.

However, the greatest irony when it comes measuring a teacher’s effectiveness in the manner that NC measures us is that is it a truer barometer of how much NC is being hurt by this current administration and General Assembly.

- Think about Medicaid not being expanded.
- Think that nearly a fourth of our children live in poverty.
- Think about the Voter ID law.
- Think about the lax regulations for fracking and coal ash ponds that hurt our water supply.
- Think about less money per pupil in schools.

- Think about more money coming from out-of-state Super PACS to fund political races here in NC than exists in the operating budgets of many counties.
- Think about TABOR and HB3.
- Think about HB2.
- Think about cut unemployment benefits.

All of those affect students in our schools. And we still do the job. Rather, we still heed the calling.

That's the best measure of what we do.

That and the drawer where I keep all of those cards and letters because I keep every one of them.

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