



Red4EdNC

NC Teachers: Pick Power Over Pity

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I was at dinner the other night with some of my school colleagues and we were having a lively conversation about all of the things that had happened at our school the previous week: cool projects our clubs were taking on, interesting comments made during meetings, the recent curriculum changes that were affecting the way we approached various subjects. We talked about faculty concerns, asked advice for certain students that were being difficult, and conversed about the governor (a favorite pass time of all educators in North Carolina). We were having a great time. And then it happened... A stranger, who had obviously overheard us talking, joined our conversation. "You guys must be teachers," he said. "I am so sorry."

"I am so sorry." That is the phrase most used when discussing the teaching profession with the public. It is said on Parent Night, at random encounters in restaurants, and basically any time anyone dares to utter the phrase, and "I am a teacher."

Teacher, the word that used to garner respect and positive recognition, has now somehow become synonymous with a person to be pitied. This is not to say that the public at large does not appreciate us; I would be lying if I didn't say that the phrase that most often follows the above one is, "I appreciate what you guys do." However, the problem lies in the fact that by saying "I am so sorry," the public is openly admitting that the state of the education profession in North Carolina is at an all-time low, despite the statements and campaign ads put forth by Governor McCrory.

All the bad campaign ads in the world can't hide the facts from the public. *The News and Observer* recently printed an article that put forth the truth about teaching in North Carolina. Referencing a study done by the National Education Association, the article painted a clear picture of what it means to be a teacher in our state and it becomes starkly clear why we hear apologies so much. According to the NEA, North Carolina is ranked 41st in teacher pay with our teachers making around \$10,000 less than the national average. The NEA also found that North Carolina was 48th in percent change in teacher salary between the 2004/05 school year and the 2014/15 school year with our salary actually decreasing 10.2% when cost of living was considered. Additionally, insult was added to injury when Master's pay was taken away, giving us limited ways to increase our salary and leaving us at the mercy of an uncaring governor and unreasonable legislature. With all this in mind, it is no wonder that educators are pitied. We are

doing more for less. We are working two jobs to compensate for the cost of living increase that our legislature has ignored. We are waiting for the \$50,000 a year that Pat has touted in his speeches.

I don't know about everyone else, but I am tired of waiting. I am tired of working two or more jobs so that I can continue in a job I love. I am tired of empty promises for higher salaries. I am tired of the lack of respect, lack of funding, and lack of opportunity. The time for change has come and it is time that we advocate as passionately for ourselves as we advocate for students. If we want better pay, more respect, and better opportunities, we have to take an active role in making these things happen. We, to paraphrase Mohatma Gandhi, need to be the change that we want to see.

But, how do we make change happen? How can we passionately advocate for ourselves in a time when it feels like we are punished for speaking out or peacefully congregating to make our voices heard? How can we positively affect our profession?

The answer is simple: **vote**.

You see, there are many ways that those in power try to keep us from being heard. They arrest us at Moral Monday protests. They threaten to take away our teaching license if we peacefully walk from Durham to downtown Raleigh. They put out false campaign ads. They take away Master's pay and tenure.

They cannot, however, keep us away from the polls. They cannot keep us from voting for people in local, state, and federal elections that will be good for education. They cannot control the box that we check on our ballot. They cannot control our right as a citizen to elect those who serve the greater good for us. Sharon Salzberg, a meditation teacher and New York Times best-selling author, once said, "Voting is the expression of our commitment to ourselves, one another, this country, and this world." She is inarguably right. Voting shows that we are committed to a better education system for ourselves and our students. Voting shows that we want our voices heard. Voting shows that we will not be weakened by radicalism. Voting shows that we are not to be pitied, but rather to be taken seriously.

We are at a crossroads for the education profession in North Carolina. We, as educators, can either sit idly by or we can act. Now is the time to act. This election is our forum and our ballots are our microphones. We can change the direction of education in our state. We can make our voices matter. Most importantly, however, we can make our votes count.