



Red4EdNC

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From Teacher, to NCDPI, and Back to Teaching

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Speaking with 30-year veteran teacher **Angie Stephenson**, so articulate and well-coiffed you would never know she has a hard time coloring in the lines.

Though she technically teaches English, she has embraced a multidisciplinary approach to instruction that led her to partner with Career & Technical Ed teachers to help struggling ninth graders transition to school and later careers. While she was at it, it seemed perfectly natural to have the Foods teacher do cooking demonstrations and the sewing and art teachers get into the game as well. Years into the project, her partners were snapped up, one by one, to work at SAS, and in time she decided a new adventure was in order. She applied to work as the Secondary English Language Arts Consultant for the state at the Department of Public Instruction. She was employed in that capacity for two and a half years, and then, to the surprise of many, she decided to return to the classroom. That atypical set of experiences motivated us to hear her story.



Growing Up, Into and Out of Teaching

Angie's family of origin didn't let geographic boundaries limit them, either. Born in Wilson, NC, they lived all over NC – Jacksonville, Rocky Mount, Greensboro, and Elizabethtown/White Lake – before moving to Maryland. After graduating from the University of Maryland, Angie took a job at Englewood High School in Jacksonville, FL where she taught for two years and met her future husband, Charlie, also a teacher. In 1989 she returned to NC to attend graduate school at NC State. True to her boundary-breaking form, when she started teaching at Broughton High School, she taught social studies and English, in five different classrooms.

Upon realizing a new high school would open in northwest Raleigh, Leesville Road High School, and a good number of her students would be transferring, Angie joined them in the transition to help open the school in 1993. In her tenure at Leesville, she has taught every course but 11th grade and every level except AP. Team teaching the ninth grade transitional class was by far the most transformational; she worked with various models to support students in building on prior knowledge and applying it in other classes. "We were a community. We were teaching them English and Business Applications, but also tried to expose them to all the Career and Technical Ed electives to help boost motivation and make school an enjoyable place to be." She and her teaching partner could move students to a different cohort to manage behavior,

and teachers could move students into different spaces and interact with kids throughout the day, in different ways.

She admits the model was partly about the structure, but also largely dependent upon the talented people she was paired with. And, as they left the school, one by one, she considered her options as well. One force driving her to seek a new positions was a changing public school culture. She felt that, increasingly, students were not being held accountable. Even today she continues to be surprised by student response to expectations: “Firm deadlines have disappeared. Weeks past a deadline, I can ask a student about a missing assignment and they will say “Oh, I’m working on it”. Or worse, some students will choose to copy and paste one and, instead of giving them a zero and teaching them a lesson, they are provided a chance to re-do it for a reduced grade. Then, if their grades are poor, I have to remediate and help them grade recover. It was and is at odds with my ethics; I wouldn’t want that for my own children because it will make them lazy and entitled. While I understand the necessity of getting students to graduate on time, we must remember our mission statement – to produce effective citizens. If you don’t know Shakespeare? Fine. But please be an honest person who will work hard and meet deadlines.” That shift in culture, paired with a never-ending paperwork load and ten years of stress from working with a struggling student population, led her to seek a new position.

DPI: Perception v. Reality

Armed with a wide range of instructional experiences, a master’s, National Board certification, and a confident, flexible demeanor, Angie quickly realized she was qualified and knowledgeable enough to undertake her new job at DPI. But she remembers being struck by some unexpected realities. “The first thing was the physical building, “ she mused,” DPI is known as the “pink palace” for its imposing building facade, but the interior is in need of attention just like many facilities across the state. It needs new carpet, simple maintenance. It’s pretty metaphorical if you think of some other things going on in our state.”

A second thing she picked up on was a small language shift. When talking about teachers, the pronoun “they” was often employed instead of “we”. “I was kind of abashed at first. THEY? I still thought of myself as a teacher, and I saw this new job as an opportunity to serve my fellow teachers in the field, but I can see that many teachers don’t view DPI presence that way. One unfortunate reality of how some DPI positions interface with teachers is that, without deliberate intent, teachers sometimes feel discounted and their unique circumstances not fully considered.” Angie recalled how her team would prepare presentations for teachers in a precise and exact manner so that all regions of the state received the same, exact information. “Every slide had a script. And some presenters have a hard time going off that script and incorporating the ideas and practices of teachers, of seeing how teachers need to approach instruction based on their region and resources. As a result, presenters might come off as being demanding, and rigid, causing teachers to feel like they are being told “there is only one way to do it.” She became more and more aware of the chasm between the ideal, coming from DPI, and the everyday reality of classroom teaching. “Teachers need to feel supported, and they need things that are realistic.”

After two years, she began to see the limits of her position in impacting student achievement: “I learned a lot, got to travel and experience the various school systems, network, it was great. There are so many people at DPI doing great projects and work that I deeply respect, such as Global Education and Comprehensive Needs Assessment visits, but in terms of my direct work, I felt like I was perpetuating a system I didn’t believe in much like I felt in 2014 when I left the

classroom. And so I realized I might as well go back and impact young people directly in a positive way, which I know I can do. I like them, and typically they like me.”

Back in the Trenches

While in some ways returning to teaching was like putting on a comfortable pair of shoes, in other ways it was like a plunge into a cold pool. First, about a year into her new position, Angie decided that she would not teach the same way if she ever came back and she threw out all of her files. Secondly, the pace of her workday was less hectic but also out of her control for the most part, “At DPI, I had a less hectic pace and a directed workload. While at school I have more autonomy and control over how my day would proceed. Teaching, there is nothing like this. It is rapid fire, on all the time, saying one thing while filing three things in the back of your head to attend to later. People are your product, and they’re each different, unique individuals. You need to instruct, guide, maintain order and at the same time not hurt someone’s feelings and injure that relationship.” Angie estimates that once you are out of the classroom 3 years, returning to classroom teaching would be a significant challenge.

She gained new insight into the exhaustion that accompanies teaching. “By the end of the day we are so exhausted because of the sheer number of decisions we have to make all day, both actively and subconsciously. That’s the element that has become more pronounced. And every year something gets added. For example, now we have to take attendance twice – once in class and then repeated on the computer, and every detail of computer entry has to be accurate. There’s little room for error.”

And, her stint at DPI really improved her teaching in the area of targeting instructional standards – she knows and teaches the standards. “Now that I know the English Language Arts standards, K-12, inside and out, and they drive my instruction, I can see the power of that deliberate focus for students.” Throwing out her old files and building lessons on that new foundation has been key to that evolutionary development. “I have not regretted coming back to the classroom. This is what I am supposed to be doing. And I think I was supposed to have that little reprieve and perspective shift, too. It’s all turned out really well and I’m so grateful I could come back here to Leesville, my home. I can’t imagine being anywhere else.”

With thirty years in teaching, most educators would be planning retirement; but, clearly, boundless is where Angie Stephenson’s comfort zone lies. The state of North Carolina, and Ms. Stephenson’s students, are all the better for it.