Red4EdNC

Teacher Voice: To Retire on Not to Retire?

Angela Scioli, Wake County Public School Teacher, et al (meaning many of her teacher friends who joined her on Facebook)

This is the first article in an occasional series highlighting NC educators with a unique perspective on education in North Carolina.

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Laura Woods had a circuitous route to teaching public school, but that's hard to believe now that she is in her 30th year at Broughton High School in Raleigh, NC, where she is a living and breathing institution.

Born in Kentucky and attending Cornell University, Laura began teaching in outdoor education and park settings in the early 1980s. A couple of subsequent rewarding years in private school classrooms then led her to UNC-Chapel Hill to get her Master's and license to teach. She has been teaching, leading and serving in the science department at the flagship high school in Wake County since she was hired in 1987. She has taught Biology (Honors and Advanced Placement), Marine Ecology, Physical Science, and a study skills course.

But this is a big year. Year 30. After this year, she can walk away at any time, with a full pension, thanks to years of investment via her monthly paycheck and a guarantee for lifetime benefits from the state pension system. She's weighing her options.

"I know the practical answer. I should retire, get my pension, go find another job and make a ton more money", she muses. But she's 58; Social Security doesn't kick in until age 66, and that's eight years to bridge through private employment. That scenario would entail basically re-inventing herself and navigating a very different daily routine. "Even if I went to teach at a private school, it would be a significant learning curve. Here, I know where everything IS. Every piece of equipment, all the rules, protocols . . . it takes a lot of time to set up labs, and labs are key in science instruction. These are realities I consider."

One thing she says would keep her around? A cost of living raise. She hasn't had a raise in quite a while. "The state doesn't want to give veteran teachers a raise, as that only contributes to their pension liabilities. They'll give a bonus here and there, but that is not helping me keep ahead of inflation."

Another primary concern is the future of the club she founded when she started, Student Action for the Environment (SAFE). In its 26th year, the club is an extension of Woods' values and philosophy. The students organize activities for Earth Day and coordinate the recycling program for the entire campus. It entails week in, week out commitment and oversight and Woods has been unable to find a less experienced teacher willing to take on the voluntary role. Many younger teachers have second jobs or are unwilling to add more hours to their long days of teaching and grading. The weight of an entire campus' worth of landfill waste literally weighs on her conscience – no small matter for an environmental scientist.

Of seemingly secondary concern are her physical ailments. She has chronic plantar fasciitis, so her otherwise professional wardrobe is necessarily accompanied with practical sneakers on a daily basis. Her feet "hurt all the time", but that's just a daily reality when you are on your feet all day. She says she's grown used to it.

She said she also grew used to the toll teaching took on family time. Since Broughton is on an A/B year-long schedule, when she takes up multi-page typed lab reports, she has 155 to grade. She says she's spent a lot of time in coffee shops over the years, away from her family so she can work as efficiently as possible. An empty nester now, she rises at 4:50, is at school from 6:55-5:00 and just brings the work home to complete. She's also always trying to work smarter, using web-based assignment platforms, exit tickets, and Scantrons or Zipgrade for multiple choice sections of assessments. But there is no replacement for written lab reports, and immediate feedback is still important.

Mentoring and assisting new teachers is also a big challenge. A new reality of teaching in NC is teacher turnover, even at a prestigious school like Broughton. In a department of fifteen, there are eight veterans and the remaining positions demonstrate fairly consistent churn. It took them an entire semester to find a Chemistry teacher this year. "You really do your best to help the new teachers – show them the ropes, share resources, help them set up equipment, whatever they need. It takes a lot of time, but you invest in them, hoping they will stay." They rarely do; she estimates most last about 2 years. Each resignation comes with a sense of loss for veteran teachers who have poured their time and efforts into the new recruits. "But you just keep investing in them. You always hope this new teacher will be the one who stays." She notes that the teachers who stay are the ones who invest in the community, "They buy homes, have children, and put down roots. They commit to be here and it makes a big difference."

Recently, Laura gave her principal a commitment to teach for at least one more year at Broughton. This in itself is a significant gift to the state's students. A teacher with Woods' content knowledge, classroom management expertise and community-minded spirit has an impact on a school and student body that is so significant it is hard to quantify. Whatever the future beyond that, we celebrate the amazing career and service of Laura Woods, today and always.

Do you know an educator with a unique perspective that we should highlight? Let us know!
Email Angie Scioli @ angelascioli@gmail.com. We would love to consider them for a future installment in this series.