

Don't Make Teaching an Assembly-line Job

Wichita Eagle, May 4, 2006

What is the overwhelming reason science teachers give for leaving the profession? It is also the foremost reason my young college students provide for switching out of a teaching major. Teachers are no longer being treated as professionals. We are being treated as assembly-line workers, preparing students solely for tests. And all blame falls on us if the student doesn't succeed on those tests.

Veteran teachers are counting up their KPERS years and taking early retirement. College students who would make excellent teachers are taking a close look at what education has become in these last few years and they are pursuing other careers.

A new superintendent at a Kansas school recently told the science teachers not only to be sure that they taught only what was in the science standards, but to teach it in the order it was in the standards; this would easily demonstrate it was all being covered. I learned about this when the science teachers asked for the international schools listing so they could apply for a school where they still have professional responsibility.

It has been the professional hallmark of an American teacher that he or she determines what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach their subject to their unique community of students. We are undergoing nothing less than the deprofessionalization of American teaching.

Oddly, many of our state school board members realize that the strength of good teachers is their professional freedom to work creatively and inspirationally with the diversity of school children in their classrooms. That is why they have stressed that the state standards are guidelines and not a dictated curriculum. Nevertheless, some school administrators and education professors are trying to turn Kansas into Texas where all lessons are scripted and tests are imposed externally. Assembly-line thinking may work for a factory where all the raw material is uniform, but a classroom of students is anything but uniform.

Not only is teacher professionalism being eliminated, but teachers are also being blamed for any and all student failure. The No Child Left Behind wording is "held accountable"—but it means "blame." By the year 2014, one hundred percent of students will be proficient. Miss these ever-rising goals and the school and the teacher will be "held accountable" or blamed.

But the best of doctors lose patients, and the best of teachers lose students. Each patient and each student presents with a unique set of problems. And each patient and student likewise shares responsibility for their physical and intellectual health. Indeed, the best doctors and the best teachers may take on the hardest cases, and have lower success rates. In earlier days, we recognized the complexity of professionalism; today, everything has been reduced to test results. Teachers' comments reflect this tragedy.

"All we do is teach to the test."

"We don't get any respect."

"All curricular decisions have been taken out of our hands."

If every time a hospital lost a patient, we blamed the surgeon, soon no one would want to become a surgeon. Blaming teachers for all student failure has now been underway for several years, and it should be no surprise that fewer want to become or remain a teacher.

Many veteran teachers and even university teacher-trainers admit that, had the current system been in place when they were young, they would never have entered teaching. There are signs that No Child Left Behind is beginning to unravel. But until teachers are given back their

professional responsibility, we can expect to see a growing shortage of professionals in the Kansas classroom.