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These Things We Believe

By John Norton

I've been working with teachers as a journalist, writer, and online-community moderator for more than 25 years. And I can't

remember a time when so many outstanding teachers were so discouraged about the conditions under which they're working and the daily criticism they're hearing from political leaders, school reform groups, and media pundits who've identified teachers as the chief cause of public education's problems.

Good teachers are frustrated, I believe, because they care so much about the work they do. They feel strait-jacketed by conflicting directives from above, and overwhelmed by constant budget cutting that makes a hard job even harder. More and more, there's a temptation to respond to the constant criticism with angry rebuttals that point out society's mixed messages: "Teach to the test." "Individualize instruction." "Stick to the teaching script." "Transform students into critical thinkers." Then, when teacher tempers boil over, we hear: "How come they're always whining?"

This point was underscored recently in some interesting dialogue that took place in the Teacher Leaders Network daily discussion group. Bob Williams, a high school math teacher and Alaska's 2009 state teacher of the year, noted all the time and energy he's invested lately in "adamantly opposing" the criticism he found to be poorly researched or ill-informed. (See **this recent essay**, for example.)

"It feels unhealthy for me to become defined only in terms of negatives or things that I am against," Williams said. "I'd like to propose that we list up to three things that we support and are convinced will help improve our schools and our profession. What do we believe in?"

Bob kicked off the discussion with three beliefs of his own:



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- Robert Marzano's meta-analysis research states that the quality of the teacher has the greatest impact on student performance. Every day I step into my classroom, I believe that the work I do is important and the skill with which I do my job makes a difference.
- Teacher content knowledge and the course curriculum get a lot of attention. The teacher's ability to build rapport with students often gets little or no attention, particularly at the high school level. I know that much of my success is because I invest time and energy into creating a sense of caring and community with my students. These are important components of being an effective teacher.
- I believe teachers need strong parental support and that support is built over time. Too often teachers can let one or two negative interactions color their perceptions of how much parents support them. In my career, I have received extremely negative parent phone calls or notes; however, with effort and multiple phone calls, I have been able to win over almost all of these parents and build trusting relationships. I believe the time we put into building positive relationships with our parents is worthwhile and helps my students succeed.

Heather, a middle grades English and speech teacher, believes:

- Assessments should be authentic. It's all about project learning and problem solving. Last year, I knew we had to do a multi-genre paper to wrap up our writing curriculum. My challenge as a teacher became to make it about something, perhaps a problem, that they could solve. So we designed a "perfect school." They researched education reform. They designed blueprints, wrote persuasive essays to the Board, and created narratives about students who would walk their perfect school's halls. The buy-in and end results were tremendous.
- Content knowledge is no more important than content delivery. I would rather have an engaging teacher who learns with her students than the content expert who can't communicate.

Elizabeth, a special education teacher, believes:

- Collaboration is the only way to fully educate students. I'm talking true collaboration, where teachers tap into the talents of other teachers and avail themselves of the vast resourcing opportunities available to provide effective instruction. It begins with teachers who can think "outside of their classrooms"—getting beyond textbooks and entering a world where learning is connected.
- Teachers must be reflective. They must make the time to think about how their teaching behaviors affect their students' learning behaviors. Reflective teachers are not afraid to try something new. Reflection washes away the "this is how I've always done it" mentality.

Susan, a family/consumer science teacher, believes:

- Education should honor and prepare students for their own lives in the world of today and tomorrow—not mimic the past educational experiences of policymakers and other adult stakeholders.
- The single most important thing a teacher can do is to ignite the fire of intellectual curiosity in children, encouraging them to continually ask, "Why?" "So what?" "Now what?" "What if?"
- It is time to acknowledge that our country calls upon the public education system to deliver a huge spectrum of services beyond education—work that influences the long range continuity and progress of our nation. Because we expect this of public schools, we should recognize them as our nation's

most precious and critical resource, and give them the attention and support they need and deserve to fulfill the heavy expectations we have placed upon them.

Marsha, a math and science teacher, believes:

- Not everything a student needs can be solved with an educational fix. In fact, most of the pressing issues associated with public schools have little to do with getting an education. They reflect more personal or societal issues. Until we acknowledge these issues and stop pretending we can remedy them with purely educational programs, I don't see the hope we need to generate for our work.
- We must begin to deliver or refer students to places where they can receive what it is that they need. In my school, that is sometimes a meal, sometimes clothing—more often it is counseling, sometimes it's medical care. Without these solutions, the classroom experiences I have to offer can't be fully utilized by all of my students. This is the elephant in the classroom—the one no one talks about and the one I believe will be the key to lasting reform and bettering our educational system.

Cossondra, a middle school teacher, believes:

- Children rise to meet our expectations. We shortchange them too often by making excuses about parents or socioeconomic status when in fact, we are their teachers and we have the most significant role in their educational success. Children come to us believing in us, trusting we will teach them and help them grow. We must honor their trust and set the bar high for each and every one of them and ourselves.
- I believe teachers have a responsibility to be the gatekeepers of their profession. We must not allow other teachers to settle for less than what we know our students deserve. We must stand up for what we believe in.

Bill, an independent school teacher and instructional leader, believes:

- Genuinely hearing, respecting, and incorporating student voices into schools is the single most important thing we can do to help them learn to be good citizens in a democracy, to expect respect and offer it in return, and to acquire other skills they will need for success in school and throughout life.
- To truly educate the whole child, we need to value all aspects of education as worthwhile and mutually reinforcing: English, foreign languages, math, performing arts, physical development, science, service, social development, social studies, visual arts, and more. I believe parents are important partners in this process—that we need to respect and honor their knowledge of their children in order to receive in return the respect we deserve for our knowledge of how to help children learn.

Nancy, a K-12 music teacher, believes:

- Learning is best when it's absorbing and enjoyable, and that kind of learning sticks to brains. Learning is meant to be fun. Small children come to us in kindergarten, excited about learning to read, to draw, to add and subtract, to talk about their communities, to sing, to touch frogs, and to play games. We turn all of that natural enthusiasm and curiosity into "subjects." Shame on us.
- We in America are in love with technologies and efficiencies, when we should be pursuing artistry,

creativity, and ideas. The best things about America have always centered on a sense of limitless possibility. The most important thing that any school or teacher can do is give kids the things necessary to construct their reality: content knowledge, skills, resources and encouragement to trust their own judgment.

Mary, a high school English and journalism teacher, believes:

- Everybody wants to be known. Teachers who tell their students on a regular basis that "I see you are an individual" will meet with more success. Students need permission and direction to take control and find their own competencies.
- School has to be able to incorporate "failure" into the learning process. An over-emphasis on grading and measuring leaves no room for failure. It has been a struggle of mine to find a safe way for students to fail in my classroom, but just knowing that it is important to learning keeps me focused on finding ways to allow failure. Learning does not occur in a straight line. We need to teach persistence to students who have identified a goal.

Laura, a preschool teacher turned technology coach, believes:

- Every child can learn. Yes they can. As a former special ed teacher, and now as a computer person, I tell them every year—"Even if the person next to you does things really fast and has a computer at home, you can learn this. It is not magic." The faces become very solemn and a few heads bob up and down. Some relax. They can learn it.

Anthony, a secondary science teacher/coach, believes:

- Our students need to be creative problem solvers. They need to be active collaborators with their peers. They need to be critical thinkers. They need to be challenged to do their very best, and what they can do will expand as their work is shared with peers, critiqued, refined, and reflected upon.
- We must teach our students through the most powerful form of instruction known to our species. We model it. We allow teachers to be creative and innovative in their instruction. We actively engage in teacher inquiry, individually and collectively. We collaborate on lessons and observe one another teach. We reflect on our work, and refine our approach. We take leadership, and work together with our colleagues to take responsibility for the learning environment at the school. Everything I want for my students we can demonstrate as teachers, if we are given the chance.

Kathie, a middle grades reading teacher, believes:

- Every child deserves teachers who believe in their potential, no matter the child's circumstance. As a teacher in one of California's lowest performing schools, I *must* keep this belief in mind. It allows me to set aside momentary disappointments and frustrations and return each day with an open heart and the ability to continue to gently and thoughtfully nudge my students away from self-destructive behaviors and toward belief in themselves.
- Teaching is one of the most underrated, most difficult, and most rewarding of professions. That's why we're all here. Despite the barriers and drawbacks. Despite the long hours and exhausting work. We know what we're doing is critically important work.
- Given sufficient time, resources, and empowerment, teachers are capable of transforming education

across the nation. We need to create a synergistic system of teacher professionalism. We do not need scripted curriculum, national standards, high-stakes tests, tenure, charter schools, policy wonks, or anything else that's in the present mix. Teacher leadership would be sufficient with sufficient opportunities and support.

If you are a teacher, what are three things you believe in?

John Norton is the co-founder and moderator of the Teacher Leaders Network. A former education journalist, he has served as executive director of the S.C. Center for Teacher Recruitment and vice president of the Southern Regional Education Board.

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