

Teachers, it's OK not to be martyrs

When we maintain that the kids come first, we inadvertently justify lower wages

BY JOSEPH DURLING

We teachers are supposed to be in the profession for the kids. Children come first. We aren't in it for the pay or the status. And our acceptance of that fate is the reason it won't change.

My first teaching position was a 60-hour-a-week job. My contract said 40, of course, but the expectation was 60. I didn't have any time to plan during the day as I was busy hall-monitoring, supervising buses and meeting with colleagues. Nor did I have time to call parents, hold conferences, or fill out forms for students with special needs. I arrived early and stayed late and still sometimes took work home. I was miser-

able. My colleagues were miserable. And we all repeated the mantra that we were doing it for the kids.

One day, I was browsing Craigslist and saw a posting for a job washing windows and sincerely thought, "Wow, that sounds really nice." Shortly after, my doctor told me my blood pressure was high and asked whether I had been sleeping well; I hadn't. I handed my resignation to my principal and vowed not to fall into the same trap of being expected to work well beyond contract hours at my next teaching position.

I kept that vow. In the following year, I prioritized my own health and happiness. That 5:30 p.m. meeting? Sorry, not available. And that Friday night

event to bond and collaborate with staff? Not going. That Saturday fundraiser sure sounds great, but I have other plans.

I've been accused of not taking my job seriously and not caring about my students. One colleague warned me that I would be fired if I didn't spend more time working. Others told me I was being selfish. Good.

I was a better teacher because I was healthier and happier. It's hard to give students your best effort when you're awake only because of coffee, or when you need to step outside of the room to cry in the hallway a bit before returning to class with your best "everything is fine" expression. Self-care is important, and it is often neglected to free up time for extra work.

With the expectation of long hours and self-sacrifice for a profession generally consid-

ered low-paying and low-status, it's not surprising that many states are experiencing teacher shortages and that schools, particularly in low socioeconomic districts, are struggling with retention.

Part of the problem is that teachers propagate the idea that martyrdom is a prerequisite to caring about students. They say if you care, you will sacrifice pay, status, time, health and a social life. And why? Because students are worth it. Kids are the future.

Once a role is defined for a person, it's difficult to escape. Society has expectations for how a teacher should act. And that is why it is imperative that we think about how we present ourselves. If we want to be expected to self-sacrifice, then continue with the narrative that the kids come first. But don't be surprised when we are accused of being selfish when requesting higher pay or

declining to stay late for an extracurricular activity.

Those are the terms we are setting.

As long as teachers promote the narrative that they are only in the profession because of inherent rewards, there is no reason for status or pay to improve. When we say we are only in it for the kids, then, yes, it is a contradiction to go on strike for higher wages. Why would anyone take instructional time away from students if he or she believes the kids always come first? If being selfish means advocating for respectable pay and reasonable hours, then maybe it's time for teachers to be selfish.

Joseph Durling is a certified Montessori teacher and doctoral student in education at Illinois State University. He wrote this for The Washington Post.

EXPRESSWAY

Every spring, the daffodils remember

BY CLARE LOWELL

There is a house that I pass every day on my morning run. I should say, there was a house. It's gone now. Bulldozed. Forgotten by many.

People in my neighborhood in Huntington weren't sad to see it go. Although the house was far from deserving landmark status, it was owned by the same family for several decades. It was grey clapboard, two stories, with three steps to the front door and a bay window off the kitchen. The yard was surrounded by a 6-foot-high stockade fence.

An apple orchard was nearby. The roof had been gone for many years, even before it was empty, its skeleton rafters covered only by a blue tarp that billowed in the wind and stood out on Google Earth like a shiny square lake perched atop the home. Gaps in the stockade fence revealed several rusted cars on the 1.3 acres.

Someone planted daffodil bulbs, dozens of them. The perky little flowers dutifully lined the broken cement walk



Daffodils that bloom every spring at a property on North Woodhill Road in Huntington. The house was torn down in 2013.

that led to a front door whose porch steps had rotted away. The door had a hand-

written sign taped to its top window that warned visitors not to ring the bell or knock.

But, not long ago, children lived there. They decorated pine trees in the front yard at Christmastime, and hung the flag on the Fourth of July. When one of the adult children returned from the Iraq War, a hand-painted sheet with her name and rank was draped in front of the house, proudly welcoming her home.

Eventually, the family was gone and the once-proud home fell into further disrepair. The house and its large yard were sold in 2012. The house was demolished in 2013, the cars junked, and a new stockade fence erected around the property. In the winter, the new owner stores shrink-wrapped boats there.

I sometimes wonder whether anyone else notices the void. While no one misses a zombie house, with its protracted degeneration, rotting shingles and irreversible decline, does anybody walking past speculate about what once stood here? Do they think about the family that once called it home?

I sometimes think of what

used to be. I remember a beef farm. I remember the aroma of the leaves burned there in autumn bonfires. But, most of all, there are the daffodils.

I never knew who planted those bulbs. I only knew that, every year, they burst forth in all their springtime glory, full of hope and beauty. Every spring, they bloom in two straight lines, in hopeful expectation of leading visitors to a front door that has ceased to exist. I stop on my runs and look at them.

Every spring, the daffodils remember.

And so do I.



Reader Clare Lowell lives in Huntington.

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