



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
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Why Do I Want to Be a Teacher?

Many current practitioners in the field of education are often asked, “Why would you want to be a teacher?” Frustrating as the tone of that question is, it’s also easy to understand where this often-cynical question finds root, and I can’t say that I necessarily blame the general public for their derision. After all, our foundational frameworks of understanding education in general, and teaching specifically, is often informed by our interactions with TV shows, 24-hour news channels, political debate, etc. Teaching is one of the few professions that nearly all members of society have interacted with for the majority of their lives (as either student or parent). School is a common bond, with uncommon experiences, and it’s those negative (or uncommon dare I say “unexpected”?) experiences that inform the motivation of politicians and bureaucrats who seek to “reform.” It’s also rooted in the skepticism formulated by news stories in today’s 24-hour cycle; and that cynicism is also the driver for negative characterization of teachers as portrayed in popular TV shows and movies. Why would you want to be a teacher? An article in the *Washington Post* (June, 2015) highlighted the top five reasons why teachers quit:

1. Reality vs. Idealism (The gap between pre-service and in-service)
2. Lack of Respect (See above)
3. Paperwork (grading, assessment, report cards, etc...)
4. Environment (Valued Added Measures (VAM) based evaluations – Fear)
5. Will I have a job? (Probably not a current reality in Washington State)

However, what happens when “would you” is replaced with “do I?” as in, “Why do I teach?” Suddenly the tone changes from defensive to proactive. It postulates a sense of optimism and hope for a profession worthy of both! As Director of Student Teaching, I have the distinct privilege of working in an environment where young aspiring teachers come to us with a sense of urgency to step in and step up to help change the world one child at a time. As they grow and mature in their training, the rose-colored glasses fade just a bit as they begin to see the realities and challenges presented by the issues in today’s classrooms (over assessment, poverty, racial inequities, language barriers, etc...). The barriers for these pre-service teachers become opportunities and for so many they move toward certification with a renewed sense of purpose and belonging.

Annually the new “doe-eyed” student comes into my office that has developed a romanticized notion of what teaching is or will be. Because of this, I challenge pre-service teachers to wrestle with “why” they want to become a teacher. Initial responses include simplistic answers such as “I love kids,” or I’ve “always wanted to teach.” Yet, over time these responses mature. The development process also affords growth in the depth of the answer. The candidates who earnestly wrestled with their

chosen profession now find themselves with answers such as “to provide all children (no exceptions) with access to quality teaching, regardless of zip-code. To model love and empathy; to be a voice for the voiceless, and to stand for justice, when no justice seems present.”

These are the reasons new teachers are choosing to teach. These are the answers to “Why I do want to be a teacher.” It’s important, then, that those of us established in this high calling, also help turn the tide and begin to promote the benefits, shorten the gap between idealism and realism, and use our voices to promote equity and access to all.

I recently asked one of our graduates to reflect on the question: Why I want to be a teacher,” after nearly completing her first year of teaching, here is her response:

Each day I see students smiling and laughing together, helping each other learn a new concept, playing soccer together during lunch, or running to come tell me the latest thing they are SO proud of. My students are why I am a teacher. They inspire me everyday, constantly reminding me that there is more to school than the Pythagorean Theorem. I have learned so much from my kids this year.

I want to be a teacher to help my students learn how to learn. Learn about life. Learn about themselves. Learn about math. Recently I asked my classes what they thought about learning. One student wrote, “School should be a place where we can be curious and happy.” I hope to make school that kind of place, where learning is desired rather than dreaded, curiosity is welcomed, and students feel comfortable thinking out of the box.

Let us not give heed to the cynicism that so easily creeps into our profession; instead let’s harken back to a time when each of us answered our own why, and let’s join forces with new colleagues entering the profession to balance the realities of high stakes assessments with the goal of bending the arc of justice to a more rounded focus on the whole child.

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