



On Target

AFT Local #2569

February 2019



Clarence Teachers Make the Difference



By —Kristin Karnitz

Opinion: Teachers aren't losers. They're lifesavers

Feb 14, 2019 5:27 PM EST

Editor's note: *President Donald Trump's son, Donald Jr., addressed his father's campaign rally in El Paso, Texas, on Monday night, instructing young conservatives "to keep up that fight, bring it to your schools. You don't have to be indoctrinated by these **loser teachers** that are trying to sell you on socialism from birth."*

*His remarks **prompted many responses** by teachers on social media.*

*Kristin Karnitz is not a teacher (she is a customer service account manager and mother from De Pere, Wisconsin). But, counting many educators in her family, she penned an **op-ed** in defense of the profession, an edited version of which appears below.*

During President Trump's rally Monday night in El Paso, Donald Trump Jr. took to the podium. I caught a clip of his speech that made my heart stop momentarily, then pound with the rage of a boxer hitting a punching bag.

"Keep up that fight. Bring it to your schools. You don't have to be indoctrinated by these loser teachers that are trying to sell you on socialism from birth," he said.

Loser teachers.

There have been many, many moments during this administration that have broken me. But this one, for some reason, hit me particularly hard. Maybe it's my mood, maybe it's the endless winter weather, maybe it's something I ate. Maybe it's because the very foundation of our education system was being attacked. I felt sick.

I come from a long line of *loser* teachers. I am the granddaughter of a *loser* teacher. The niece of *loser* teachers. The cousin of *loser* teachers. The sister of a *loser* teacher. The friend of many *loser* teachers.

Once upon a time, I wanted to be a *loser* teacher too. But when I approached that point in my college life to choose that track, I bailed. I wasn't strong enough. I wasn't selfless enough.

I wasn't *loser* enough.

You see, being a *loser* teacher requires a stamina that I recognized fairly early that I wasn't cut out for, at least when I was 20 years old and trying to navigate my future.

I think of the *loser* teachers in our country, and what it takes to be them. Though not a *loser* teacher, let me take a stab at educating all the non-teacher 'winners.' Summers off is a myth. Many teachers work second jobs, or teach summer school. Most of this is to supplement their income. And a chunk of that, their own money, is reinvested into their classrooms. When budgets are tight, and a first grade teacher needs a rug for her kids to sit on at group lesson time, she buys her own. Many teachers keep a stash of food in their cabinet that they bought on their own, to sneak a granola bar to a young one who came to school that morning without breakfast. A hungry child has a tough time learning. And I don't know about you, but I sure don't see many teachers driving around in a Mercedes convertible with all of their summer free time.

Short work days? A school day may be around 7 hours for the kids. *Loser* teachers are there well before and after. They are spending evenings writing lesson plans and grading papers. There are staff meetings, extracurriculars they lead,

presentations and continuing education classes that are required to maintain their jobs and licenses.

The responsibility of a *loser* teacher extends far beyond standing in front of a classroom sharing a lesson. Teachers are expected to wear more hats than most of us could ever dream of putting on.

Teachers are not just educators. They are counselors. I had a teacher in middle school who reached out to students that exhibited signs of depression. He met one-on-one to guide them and extend a hand. I know, because I was one of them. And almost 30 years later, I will never forget that day he sat me down and put a reassuring hand on my shaking one, and helped me navigate that dark place.

Teachers are not just educators. They are surrogate parents. There are so many kids from broken homes and unstable situations. A hug from a teacher may be the only time a child receives a gentle touch of love that day. A word of encouragement or a high five in the hallway may be the only direct acknowledgement a child receives that week. A pair of mittens may find their way into the locker of a student that would otherwise have cold hands on the playground and walk home. They discipline. They nurture. They help young minds grow in an environment that may be the only stable place a child has in their lives.

Teachers are not just educators. They save lives. In a world where active shooter drills are now practiced regularly in our schools, teachers need to be on alert at all times. They are the protectors of these young lives. When the unthinkable happens, some have made the ultimate sacrifice.

They have taken a bullet for children that aren't even their own. Can any of you non-losers say you'd do the same?

So just to summarize today's lesson here: Teachers are not just educators. They are everyday angels among us. They deserve our support, our respect and our unyielding gratitude.

Teachers encourage students to embrace kindness, and to avoid name calling, so I will take a lesson from the great educators I've had throughout my life, and resist countering this ridiculous attack with meanness. It is taking every fiber of my being to do so. But I had good *loser* teachers who would want me to take the high road. So in honor of them, I will.

Instead, I raise a glass to the *loser* teachers in our country. May we all strive to attain your level of loserdom. Our nation is in sore need of more wonderful, amazing *losers* like you.

Sep 3, 2018

Why Do Teachers Join the Union?

Peter GreeneContributor



Teacher in a classroom. (Getty Royalty Free)

The past year has brought a renewed focus on teachers unions. This was the year that saw a wave of [state-wide teacher strikes](#), a wave that continues right now in [Washington state](#). It was also the year that brought [the Janus decision](#) which threatens to extend the effects of Right-To-Work to states that have not yet seen that law come to their state capitol. And conservative groups have been poised to [launch a campaign of encouraging teachers](#) and other public employees to quit their unions, even as unions have hunkered down to work at holding on to members.

It seems like a good time to ask the question: Why do teachers join the union at all?

For some people, the teachers union is a nest of crazy leftists, people [who don't care about students](#) but are just in the education biz for the money. But union members represent a far more complex group. Remember, one in five AFT members and one in three NEA members [voted for Donald Trump](#). Union leadership itself, when trying to exercise some political clout, has reason to promote the idea that the unions are a monolithic whole, a unified army ready to be unleashed. But that's not true for all issues. Many of the same criticisms lobbed from outside the unions are also leveled from inside it.

So what unifies teacher union members? It's this statement:

I want to be a teacher, and--

I want to be a teacher, and I need to provide my family with a decent standard of living.

I want to be a teacher, and I can't do it well when I have to constantly watch my back because I could be fired at any minute for any reason.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to work alongside people who didn't settle for my district as an employer of last resort.

I want to be a teacher, and I don't want to be forced to sacrifice my entire life every time my employer decides to have me give extra time for free.

I want to be a teacher, and I don't want to risk my family's livelihood every time I stand up against injustice or stand up for my students.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to work for someone who provides the support or resources to help me do the job.

I want to be a teacher, and I want to be treated fairly, professionally and respectfully.

I want to be a teacher, and because I cannot negotiate any of these conditions successfully as just one person, I'm joining a union so that we can work for these conditions for all of us, together.

Every classroom teacher has great responsibility and very little power. The past several decades have foisted more responsibilities on them even as they have been given less and less power to decide how best to meet the demands set for them (get those test scores up, lift your students out of poverty, make sure you're following the newest set of standards that were just handed down, etc...). Meanwhile, states and school districts have steadily stiffed teachers financially, not just in the form of teacher pay, but in the money that is spent on supplies, support, and classrooms. The wave of strikes this year is just one measure of the discontent that conditions have stirred up among teachers. After all, a strike may be stressful and difficult, but those teachers plan to come back. The spreading slow-motion walkout that folks keep euphemistically calling a [national teacher shortage](#) is more problematic because those are people who have decided to walk away from the classroom for good. States like Wisconsin, which stripped its unions of power with [Act 10](#), are [feeling the shortage](#) acutely.

Being, or even just becoming, a teacher comes with obstacles that can make a teaching career seem unsustainable. In a well-run district in a well-run state, good administrators and good policy makers can tackle those obstacles. But

those folks just pass through for a few years while a teacher hopes for a lifetime in the classroom. What are the odds that she will always be working for good obstacle-tacklers? I suppose we could trust all the bosses to benevolently tackle those obstacles, but history does not give us optimism on that score; in fact, it's the bosses who created some of the obstacles in the first place.

Some union foes see the unions as an unnecessary buffet of caviar and gold-encrusted lobster, but for those who want to teach, the union is like the oxygen supply in a submarine--critical to completing the mission (even if they haven't actually joined). It's a system that doesn't always work well, but the alternative is millions of teachers struggling to survive on their own, with hundreds of thousands deciding they just can't do it.

Teachers do not join the union because they want to get rich or get out of work or decide elections. They join the union because they want to teach. If we could just remember that this Labor Day and all the school days to follow, conversations about the union might be a little more productive.

Editor's Note

Each month the On Target will come out near the end of the month.

If you have something that you would like included, please send as a Word document by the 20th of the month to:

lpunek@clarenceschools.org

Items that could be included are: Articles dealing with education/unions, Good ideas for teaching, something humorous/light dealing with education, Information for sharing, Opinion pieces on education, Advertisement for a service you provide.

Thank you,
Lisa Panek

- What Other States Are Dealing With



Education

W.Va. teachers' unions call for strike over education bill

By **Associated Press**

February 18

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — West Virginia teachers unions on Monday called a statewide strike over an education bill that they view as lacking their input and as retaliation for a walkout last year.

The strike is scheduled to start Tuesday, leaders of three unions for teachers and school service workers said at a news conference, almost a year to the day after teachers began a nine-day walkout.

“We are left with no other choice,” said Fred Albert, president of the American Federation of Teachers’ West Virginia chapter.

The 2018 walkout launched the national “Red4Ed” movement, which included strikes in Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arizona, Washington and,

more recently, Los Angeles and Denver. Teachers in Oakland, Calif., have authorized a strike starting Thursday.

Now the movement has come full circle.

The West Virginia Senate and House of Delegates have approved separate and far different versions of the complex bill, but both call for creating the state's first charter schools. The unions believe that charter schools will erode traditional public schools.

The Senate was working on an amendment Monday. The unions have said lawmakers never asked for their insight into what has become a rushed process in that chamber.

Among other things, the Senate's amendment would allow for as many as seven charter schools statewide and provide for up to 1,000 education savings accounts for parents to pay for private school. The accounts would be for special-needs students and those who have been bullied.

Proponents say the moves would give parents more school choices.

The House version does not call for such savings accounts and would limit charter schools to one each in Cabell and Kanawha counties.

Like the House, the Senate has removed a clause that would invalidate the entire legislation if any part is struck down. It also took out language requiring teacher pay to be withheld during a strike as long as the school calendar is unaffected.

Teachers won a 5 percent pay raise after last year's strike. The current legislation calls for similar raises.

Andrew Pallotta: On Property Taxes, We Need Cuts Not Caps

By ANDREW PALLOTTA · FEB 12, 2019

When I listen to politicians in Albany debate property taxes, I am reminded of a famous quote from T.S. Eliot, who said, “Most of the evil in this world is done by people with good intentions.” The rush to make New York’s flawed and undemocratic property tax cap permanent is an example of something that started with the best of intentions, but has led to the cruelest of outcomes.

I certainly understand the goal. I am a taxpayer. I am also president of a union that represents workers in every community of this state. I spend much of my time on the road, listening to the concerns of our members and the people we serve. Nobody wants to pay one dime more in taxes than is absolutely necessary.

But we have to be realistic about what the tax cap does and does not do. The truth is this: Despite its good intentions, the tax cap has not reduced the tax burden facing too many communities.

According to the Tax Foundation, in 2014 New York State ranked 2nd in the country in state and local taxes per capita. Today, after years of the tax cap, we’re number 1 – and not in a good way.

What the tax cap *has* done is widen the gap in education funding between wealthy and poor school districts. It has denied our state's poorest school children the educational opportunities provided to those in wealthier districts.

Its not just in New York. Look at what happened in California. In 1978, voters passed Proposition 13, which limited property tax increases to two percent. This led to decades of drastic underfunding for public education, destroying a once robust public education system. Californians are now trying to repeal Proposition 13.

We should not repeat California’s mistake. Instead, New York should replace the temporary cap with something that will actually work.

We need real reform that would prevent people from being taxed out of the communities they love, while also funding the schools and public services that made them fall in love with that community in the first place.

Unfortunately, the illusion of a quick fix is easier than the hard work of real reform. The State Senate has passed a bill making the tax cap permanent. The Governor included it in his budget proposal.

It is up to the Assembly to stop this train so we can have a real debate about real reform and provide real relief to the people who need it.

The Corporate Plan to Groom U.S. Kids for Servitude by Wiping Out Public Schools

By **Lynn Parramore** APR 6, 2018 | INSTITUTIONS, POLICY & POLITICS

Training first-world children for a third-world life

It was the strike heard 'round the country.

West Virginia's public school teachers had endured years of low pay, inadequate insurance, giant class sizes, and increasingly unlivable conditions—including attempts to force them to record private details of their health daily on a **wellness app**. Their governor, billionaire coal baron Jim Justice, pledged to allow them no more than an annual 1% raise—effectively a pay cut considering inflation—in a state where teacher salaries ranked 48th lowest out of 50 states. In February 2018, they finally revolted: In a tense, nine-day work stoppage, they managed to wrest a 5% pay increase from the state. Teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky have now **revolted** in similar protests.

It's the latest battle in a contest between two countervailing forces: one bent on reengineering America for the benefit of the wealthy, the other struggling to preserve dignity and security for ordinary people.

If the story turns out the way the Jim Justices desire, the children of a first-world country will henceforth be groomed for a third-world life.

Gordon Lafer, Associate Professor at the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon, and Peter Temin, Professor Emeritus of Economics at MIT, help illuminate why this is happening, who is behind it, and what's at stake as the educational system that once united Americans and prepared them for a life of social and economic mobility is wiped out of existence.

The Plan: Lower People's Expectations

When Lafer began to study the tsunami of corporate-backed legislation that swept the country in early 2011 in the wake of *Citizens United*—the 2010 Supreme Court decision that gave corporations the green light to spend unlimited sums to influence the political system—he wasn't yet clear what was happening. In state after state, a pattern was emerging of highly coordinated campaigns to smash unions, shrink taxes for the wealthy, and cut public services. Headlines blamed globalization and technology for the squeeze on the majority of the population, but Lafer began to see something far more deliberate working behind the scenes: a hidden force that was well-funded, laser-focused, and astonishingly effective.

Lafer pored over the activities of business lobbying groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) – funded by giant corporations including Walmart, Amazon.com, and Bank of America – that produces “model legislation” in areas its conservative members use to promote privatization. He studied the Koch network, a constellation of groups affiliated with billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch. (Koch Industries is the country's second-largest private company with business including crude oil supply and refining and chemical production). Again and again, he found that corporate-backed lobbyists were able to subvert the clear preferences of the public and their elected representatives in both parties. Of all the areas these lobbyists were able to influence, the policy campaign that netted the most laws passed, featured the most big players, and boasted the most effective organizations was public education. For these U.S. corporations, undermining the public school system was the Holy Grail.

After five years of research and the publication of *The One Percent Solution*, Lafer concluded that by lobbying to make changes like increasing class sizes, pushing for online instruction, lowering accreditation requirements for teachers, replacing public schools with privately-run charters, getting rid

of publicly elected school boards and a host of other tactics, Big Business was aiming to dismantle public education.

The grand plan was even more ambitious. These titans of business wished to completely change the way Americans and their children viewed their life potential. Transforming education was the key.

The lobbyists and associations perfected cover stories to keep the public from knowing their real objectives. Step one was to raise fears about an American **educational crisis** that did not, in fact, exist. Lafer notes, for example, that the reading and math scores of American students have remained largely unchanged for forty years. Nonetheless, the corporate-backed alarmists worked to convince the public that the school system was in dire condition.

Step two was to claim that unproven reforms to fix the fictional crisis, like online learning, were sure to improve outcomes, despite the fact that such schemes go directly against hard evidence for what works in education and deny students the socialization that is crucial to a child's progress. Sometimes the reformers said the changes were needed because of budget deficits; other times, they claimed altruistic aims to improve the quality schools.

In Lafer's view, their strategy had little to do with either.

The Motivation: Keep the Masses Down as Inequality Rises

It's one thing for big businesses to be anti-worker and anti-union, but also anti-student? Why would business lobbies deliberately strive to create what amounts to widespread education failure?

It's not hard to see how certain sectors in the corporate world, like the producers of online learning platforms and content, could cash in. But it's harder to fathom why corporate leaders who don't stand to make money directly would devote so much time and attention to making sure, for example, that no public high school student in the state of Florida could take home a diploma without taking an online course. (Yes, that's now **law** in the Sunshine State).

It's about more than short-term cash. While Lafer acknowledges that there are legitimate debates among people with different ideological positions or pedagogical views, he thinks big corporations are actually more worried about something far more pragmatic: how to protect themselves from the masses as they engineer rising economic inequality.

“One of the ways I think that they try to avoid a populist backlash is by lowering everybody's expectations of what we have a right to demand as citizens,” says Lafer. “When you think about what Americans think we have a right to, just by living here, it's really pretty little. Most people don't think you have a right to healthcare or a house. You don't necessarily have a right to food and water. But people think you have a right to have your kids get a decent education.”

Not for long, if Big Business has its way. In President Trump and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, they have dedicated partners in redirecting public resources to unregulated, privately owned and operated schools. Such privatization plans, many **critics** say, will reinforce and amplify America's economic inequality.

U.S. public schools, which became widespread in the 1800s, were promoted with the idea that putting students from families of different income levels together—though not black Americans and other racial minorities until the 1950s—would instill a common sense of citizenship and national identity. But today, large corporations are scoring huge successes in replacing this system with a two-tiered model and a whole new notion of identity.

Lafer explains that in the new system, the children of the wealthy will be taught a broad, rich curriculum in small classes led by experienced teachers. The kind of thing everybody wants for kids. But the majority

of America's children will be consigned to a narrow curriculum delivered in large classes by inexperienced staff—or through digital platforms with no teachers at all.

Most kids will be trained for a life that is more circumscribed, less vibrant, and, quite literally, shorter, than what past generations have known. (Research **shows** that the lifespan gap between haves and have-nots is large and rapidly growing). They will be groomed for insecure service jobs that dull their minds and depress their spirits. In the **words** of Noam Chomsky, who **recently spoke about education** to the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), “students will be controlled and disciplined.” Most will go to school without developing their creativity or experiencing doing things on their own.

The New Reality: Two Americas, Not One

Economist Peter Temin, former head of MIT's economics department and INET **grantee**, has written a book, *The Vanishing Middle Class*, which **explains** how conditions in America are becoming more like a third-world country for the bulk of its people. He agrees with Lafer that the corporate-driven war on public schools is not just about money, but also about a vision of society.

People like Betsy DeVos, he says, are following the thinking of earlier ideologues like James Buchanan, the Tennessee-born, Nobel Prize-winning economist who promoted current antigovernment politics in the 1970s. The “shut-the-government-down” obsession is really an extreme form of libertarianism, he says, if not anarchism.

Temin also agrees that shrinking the horizons of America's kids makes sense to people who follow this philosophy. “They want to exploit the lower members of the economy, and reducing their expectations makes them easier to manipulate,” says Temin. “When they aren't able to go to college and get decent jobs, they become more susceptible to things like racist ideology.”

In other words, dismantling the public schools is all about control.

Buchanan was an early proponent of school privatization, and while he echoed the fears and frustration many Americans felt concerning desegregation, he typically made a non-race-based case for preserving Jim Crow in a new form. He argued that the federal government should not be telling people what to do about schooling and suggested that citizens were being stripped of their freedom. But as Sam Tanenhaus **points out** in *The Atlantic*, issues of race always lurked in the background of calls for educational freedom and “choice.” In a paper he co-authored, Buchanan stated, “every individual should be free to associate with persons of his own choosing.” Segregationists knew what that meant.

Policies that end up reducing educational opportunities for those who lack resources creates inequality, and economic inequality reduces support for public schools among the wealthy. It's a vicious feedback loop.

In his book, Temin describes a process that happens in countries that divide into “dual economies,” a concept first outlined by West Indian economist W. Arthur Lewis, the only person of African descent to win a Nobel Prize in economics. Lewis studied developing countries where the rural population tends to serve as a reservoir of cheap labor for people in cities — a situation the top tier works very hard to maintain. Temin noticed that the Lewis model now fits the pattern emerging in the richest country in the world.

America, according to Temin, is clearly breaking down into two sectors: Roughly 20% of the population are members of what he calls the “FTE sector” (i.e., the finance, technology, and electronics sectors). These lucky people get college educations, land good jobs, enjoy social networks that enhance their success, and generally have access to enough money to meet most of life's challenges. The remaining 80% live in a world nothing like this; they live in different geographies and have different legal statuses, healthcare systems, and schools. This is the low-wage sector, where life is getting harder.

People in the low-wage sector carry debt. They worry about insecure jobs and unemployment. They get sick more often and die younger than previous generations had. If they are able to go to college, they end up in debt. “While members of the first sector act,” Temin has **said**, “these people are acted upon.”

Temin traces the emergence of the U.S. dual economy to the 1970s and 80s, when civil rights advances were making a lot of Americans uneasy. People who had long been opposed to the New Deal began to find new ways to advance their agenda. The Nixon administration gave momentum to anti-government, free market fundamentalist ideologies, which gained even more support under Reagan. Gradually, as free-market programs became policy, the rich began to get richer and economic inequality began to rise. Economist Paul Krugman has called this phenomenon the “**Great Divergence**.”

But it was still possible to move from the lower sector to the affluent sector. The path was tough, and much harder for women and people of color. Yet it existed. Through education and a bit of luck, you could develop the skills and acquire the social capital that could propel you out of the circumstances you were born into.

The dismantling of public education, as Temin sees it, will shut off that route for vastly more people. Like the privatization of prisons, which has increased incarceration rates and cut the mobility path off for more Americans, putting schools into private hands will land even more on the road to nowhere. Even those who were born into the middle class will increasingly get pushed back.

The Future: Mobilization or Bloodshed?

Temin relates that in human history, unitary economies are more the exception than the rule.

In the U.S., there was the Jim Crow era, the Gilded Age, and before that, slavery, which was an extreme form of dual economy. But from the end of WWII through the 1960s, the country began to develop a unitary economy. The idea that everybody should have opportunities became more and more widespread. But there was a backlash, and America still dealing with it.

In the Lewis model of the dual economy, there is still path to the upper sector, but Temin warns that America may be on the way to going one step further. “If you really prevent people from moving up, you get something that looks like Russia or Argentina,” he says. In these two-tiered societies, life is difficult for most people. Life expectancies for all but the affluent go down.

Unfortunately, once you’ve developed a dual economy, getting out of it isn’t pretty. Temin notes that it often happens through devastating wars. “Sometimes the kings who are all cousins turn on each other,” he says. “Other times, the leaders sleepwalk into the war as Trump could possibly do with North Korea.”

Such upheavals create instability that sometimes opens up the possibility of restructuring society for the benefit of more people. But it’s a painful, bloody process. Political mobilization can work, but it’s very hard to get various groups who are dissatisfied to join forces.

Lafer points out that we don’t yet know how this story is going to turn out. “Politics remains forever contingent, never settled,” he says. “The struggle between public interest and private power will continue to play out in cities and states across the country; even with the heightened influence of money in the era of *Citizens United*, the power of popular conviction should not be underestimated.”

The teachers in West Virginia and now other states across the country have turned the anger fueled by the corporate vision of the future in a positive direction. They are fighting back, peacefully, and winning something—not just money, but a sense of dignity suited to the job of preparing the country’s kids for life. It remains to be seen if the rights of the many can triumph over the selfishness of the few, and whether economic servitude will be the fate of the children of the wealthiest and most powerful country the world has ever seen.

State of the Union: Trump's priorities are dead wrong for America

NEA's Eskelsen García: 'The president should be investing in students, not walls'

WASHINGTON - February 05, 2019 -

President Donald Trump tonight delivered his second State of the Union address, which was delayed due to his dangerous government shutdown that inflicted unnecessary pain on federal employees, contractors, and operations across the country while perpetrating damage to the U.S. economy.

The following statement can be attributed to [NEA President Lily Eskelsen García](#), who attended the speech as a guest of Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (D-California):

“The State of the Union address comes at a time when this country is more divided than ever, and Donald Trump made clear he seeks to deepen those divisions while misleading the American public in the process. His priorities do not reflect those of the majority of Americans and will only serve to harm working families, our kids, our schools and our communities.

“Trump's actions speak louder than his rhetoric as we have witnessed him push for the wrong priorities like building a border wall, [arming teachers](#), [giving tax cuts to the wealthy](#) and [pushing for vouchers that siphon off money from public schools](#). Trump and his administration should focus on what will truly help students — significant investments in public education and public infrastructure, protecting schools and communities from gun violence, and making affordable health care for all. Trump's fixation on creating deeper chaos and his misguided pursuit of building a wall reflect the wrong values. The president should be investing in students, not walls.”

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The National Education Association is the nation's largest professional employee organization, representing more than 3 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators and students preparing to become teachers. Learn more at www.nea.org.

Dyslexia and High School

By: Melinda Pongrey

Last week I visited a local high school to observe a freshman. Even though the end of school is near, I wanted to see first-hand how the teachers were implementing accommodations and modifications for his severe dyslexia. Before school began in the fall, I had met with this student twice a week to build his reading, writing and study skills. He began the year rating school as a "-1" on a one-to-ten scale. By mid-winter, he had moved his self-assessment of school to a "10." Since then he had become increasingly discouraged. Finally I realized that I better get a first-hand look at what was going on in his classes.

So, his teacher kindly let me sit in the back of the class. I spent the hour noting the tasks that he was asked to complete along with the other students in his literature class.

First task: Copy the definition of a vocabulary word from the overhead

This task is very difficult for him to do, especially in the time allowed.

Having severe dyslexia means that he has trouble making accurate and automatic memories for print. Spelling words requires an accurate memory. Even copying from the board is tedious, slow, and oftentimes, not very accurate. At this point, probably a real waste of time.

Alternate ideas:

Students could scan the board with their cell phones using ScanR Or the teacher could have text available online so students could use various software, for instance CLiCk, Speak for text-to-speech support. Helpful, as students could access the vocabulary words at home or at school on their computers.

Second task: Note the date of the upcoming vocabulary test

Again, this went by too fast for him to write down.

Dyslexia is a language-based disability. For many students, processing language is slow. For instance, when I was traveling in Germany, I had a moment in the train station when I heard an announcement with my ears, and after a long pause, my brain translated the meaning. If you are sitting in class trying to listen to the teacher, but your language is being processed slower than your ears take in the sound — watch out! Students zone out just from the fatigue of trying to "translate" meaning and keep up.

Alternate ideas:

The teacher could post assignments on Google Calendar and have reminders sent to students' cell phones automatically. Also, calendars can

be set up so parents can check assignments, too. At this point, many of his assignments were illegible when he brought his written notes home.

Third task: Read a paragraph aloud from the overhead

The teacher good-naturedly asked him if the print was too small or if he could read the paragraph aloud, seeming to include him with the other students who read aloud.

I have to admit, I was pretty surprised by this one. Most students who read well below grade level will not even attempt to read a passage aloud in front of their peers. When you read to yourself, you can skip over big words, or unfamiliar names — words don't have to be pronounced correctly to get the meaning.

The student quickly agreed that the print was still too small to see; however, I knew this was an excuse. The teacher called on students around the room to read aloud and meant to be inclusive.

Alternate ideas:

Don't do it! Let students volunteer to read aloud.

Are you tired out yet? Already, this student has barriers to accessing the curriculum akin to walking a minefield — and this only in the first 15 minutes of class. Whew! Halfway through the 50-minute class and already, I could see the difficulty of really understanding what having severe dyslexia means for a student in our educational system.

Being inside a learning difference or disability can feel so invisible. Imagine that you have to go through your day walking across a tightrope. Imagine that no one, including yourself, can see that you are always walking on a tightrope. So everyone treats you as if you can walk without any special considerations. You keep trying to keep up, and can't figure out how everyone else seems to zoom ahead of you all the time. Teachers tell you to try harder and then assign extra laps for you as an incentive when you are too slow! You get so tired, when others seem to expend any effort...

Back to the class — I sit in the back of the literature class and note the remaining activities and the tasks that the teacher assigns. The student I am shadowing has a very high IQ, most likely one of the highest in the class. Yet, having a dyslexic learning profile affects his ability to use language efficiently. Everything language computes slower. Reading and writing are labored, inaccurate and so slow that he frequently loses his train of thought. Seemingly simple tasks, like copying a definition from the board, or writing down a question dictated by the teacher, become Herculean challenges.

Fourth task: Read *To Kill a Mockingbird* silently for 15 minutes

This student has documented difficulty reading.

From my work with this student, I know that this is a waste of time. He will have to go home and listen to an audiobook or use reading software on his home computer so that he can read with audio and visual support.

Probably, his parents will read the book aloud to him. In class, he sits with his book open, appearing to read, yet I know that this is difficult and inaccurate at best.

Dyslexia used to be known as "word-blindness" which is not completely accurate, but might be a helpful concept when thinking about assigning reading to students who have trouble reading print. You wouldn't ask a blind student to sit and read a book for 15 minutes. You would provide a different format for the book — audio or braille.

Alternate ideas:

The teacher, knowing that the class is behind on their reading and nearing the end of school, is trying to be helpful. Interestingly, quite a few students don't pick up their books, but sit doing other things for 15 minutes. I suspect many others in the class would benefit from using various types of software support to "read" the text.

I note that many students have iPods and cellphones. My guess is that because this class is the "rowdy" class, many of the students may not read easily. Perhaps the text could be accessible in various formats so that students could pick how they "read" best. Some might like to listen to a recorded book, usually read by an actor, in mp3 format on the iPods. Some might like to read along with audio and visual support, for instance using WYNN Reader. Of course, some like reading books the traditional way.

Fifth task: Listen and write four dictated questions on a piece of notebook paper

Too much writing, too fast, with difficulty trying to spell words correctly.

Again, back again to the language processing difficulties. Listening requires processing the meaning and being able to focus on what is important — quickly and automatically. Think of how quickly and accurately you process information when learning a second language.

Writing down a dictated sentence requires:

- translating what comes in your ears into printed shapes that make letters
- putting the right letters together to spell words
- funneling the correct information through the end of your pencil

This is easy if all systems are go. You need:

- an accurate memory for letters and for spelling words
- efficient language processing to sort all the information in your head
- an accurate, automatic fine-motor memory for forming letters and words
- motor-planning skills
- accurately "seeing" and being able to read your writing to edit spelling

Alternate ideas:

Because listening and writing are not accurate and automatic for many students who have dyslexia, the seemingly simple task of copying dictated questions is NOT EASY. Processing difficulties could be bypassed by using the traditional format of handing out a paper with the questions printed on it.

Or, more interestingly, the teacher could post the questions on a classroom blog or website for students to access in the class, in the library, or at home. Even more engaging, would be to text message the questions to the student's cell phones. Students could text-message the answers back to the teacher's e-mail using the free software Jott? Cool? Even cooler is the word prediction support on cellphones, which aids spelling and writing.

Sixth task: Listen to class discussion, then handwrite the answers to the dictated questions

Again, the information is presented in one format — through talking. The student must listen for the main ideas while trying to write down the correct answers — all quickly in a classroom full of distractions.

Okay. The teacher is asking good questions about the story. He has the students write the questions with the answers from the discussion in preparation for a test next week. Many students seem engaged by the questions of race and justice in the story.

Alternate ideas:

All of this information could be posted on a blog or webpage so that the material is already written, and available for text-to-speech support. Expanding from the paper-pencil modalities, the teacher could have the students watch a movie made from the book. Students could write a play and perform the important events from the book, and/or write a rap about the story. In other words, expand on multiple intelligences using multisensory inputs.

By adding free software programs, like Microsoft Reader, or Click,Speak, Google Docs with spellcheck installed, Jott and ScanR for cell phones, mp3 recordings for iPods, as well as more complex programs, such as WYNN Wizard, the classroom becomes more accessible and engaging for all students. Integrating options into the classroom allows all students to access information in the way that works best for them. No student had to sit and pretend to read.

About the author

Melinda Pongrey, MEd, established Sisiutl Center for Learning in 1997 in Port Townsend after training and working with Another Door to Learning in Tacoma. For the past fifteen years, she has successfully worked with children and adults who experience many types of learning differences, including dyslexia, ADHD, language delays, motor-spatial and visual-spatial difficulties.



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