

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH?

by Robert Rubinstein

(published in THE HUMANIST, May/June – 2005)

We traveled to College Park, Maryland, for our daughter's graduation from the College of Education at the University of Maryland. After five years of study, working nights as a waitress and summers as a camp counselor, and borrowing money, she had earned her degree in elementary education. Her dream is to teach and make a difference in her students' lives.

The day after graduation, she asked us to visit the first grade class where she had done her student teaching. This is a school in the middle of hundreds of high-rise tenement apartments for low-income families. Seventy-five percent of the students in this school were designated as "remedial students" and nearly all were minorities. Since these students couldn't pass the federally-required tests, the students and school had been classified as "failing." There was little hope, without major funding and increased staff, of ever succeeding and removing that label. The principal was to be transferred because, according to the federal government's "No Child Left Behind" law, this was a "failing school" and, as principal, she was responsible.

Our daughter entered the classroom to shouts of joy: “Miss Rubinstein! Miss Rubinstein!” and students rushed over to her; grasped her hands and led her into the room. And our daughter radiated with happiness to see “her kids” again.

Our son teaches high school social studies in Queens, New York. He is in a masters-in-education teaching fellowship program and has been placed in an inner city school. He’s had an intense time adjusting to students who require lots of guidance, a great deal of work with basic skills, who lack teaching materials, are threatened by testing, and have a wide-range of academic and personal needs. After several months of teaching, he said, “I had the students do evaluations about what they liked, didn’t like, how I should change my teaching. They had some nice comments! . . . I was walking on the street and this student who I don’t have in class came up to me and said, ‘I really like the quotes you put on the board. Makes me think.’”

Since President Bush suddenly cut funds for this fellowship program to recruit and train teachers so desperately needed in the New York City schools, my son now has to pay to earn his “fellowship” masters degree.

My son and daughter have just become teachers. They’ve earned their degrees, teaching credentials, have gone in debt in order to teach in our schools and work with young people who will determine our future. As one who spent 32

years teaching middle school students, I am very proud of them - and very concerned.

I taught through the 1970s-1990s, and I was fortunate enough to have taught at a special public school, Roosevelt Junior High-Middle School in Eugene, Oregon. I was a teacher at a school whose staff focused on students first, devoting immense time, expertise and energy to fostering student success in the classroom and in life. For most students and teachers, this program worked very well. During those years, our students consistently achieved top academic marks in the state and, even more important, enjoyed coming to school. We had great parent support, and most teachers enjoyed the challenge and the hectic pace of teaching at Roosevelt.

As a teacher in this elective, ungraded, curriculum program, I had the opportunity to teach classes in such unique subjects as “Multicultural Mythology,” “Mystery Story,” “Wild & Tame” – animal literature and the care of animals, “Folktales & Storytelling” – which incorporated basic speech skills, “Advanced Writing,” “Sports History,” and “Through the Camera’s Eye – American History Through Movies.” For 24 years, my students in the nationally-known “Troupe of Tellers” journeyed during the school day – three times a week during the term – to perform for some 3000 other students in elementary and secondary schools each year, plus adult groups.

Other Roosevelt teachers engaged the students with classes in Shakespeare, space travel, zoology, computer math, cartooning, archery and bow-making, and more. These classes incorporated basic skills: reading, writing, research, and presentations. Students and teachers became excited about these unique classes. Learning, after all, should be fun – for both the student and teacher, should encourage students to think, and, hopefully, become life-long learners.

Each of these teacher-designed classes had to meet education goals, evaluated by the administration. Students, with parent and teacher guidance, chose classes based on each student's skill level and skill needs, and interests. A class could have a mix of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Teachers didn't just give grades, but commented on each student's progress and needs. Teachers, along with administrators and, sometimes, classified people, worked together to solve concerns.

People came from across the country to find out how the "Roosevelt Program" worked. They wanted to know how we accomplished this positive educational experience without large amounts of extra funds. Why did we have so few serious student behavior problems over the years? Why did our students do so well?

Today, there's not much left of the "Roosevelt Program." Budget cuts, teacher burn-out, changes in administration, and, most of all, the mania for and

expense of testing have devastated 32 years of success. Today, in this country, 50% of those entering the teaching profession quit by the fifth year due to overcrowded classrooms, behavior problems, administrators who lack knowledge and skill, lack of parent support, and the inadequate salary for teachers to raise their own families.

So, I wonder – and worry – will my two children who have such love and care for kids and potential as teachers – survive beyond those five years? Will they be allowed to teach as teachers can and should – and as our kids need?