

## A Teacher's Commitment

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Atop a hill in New England sits my old public high school. I visited it in January, not just because it is my alma mater, but because it has been my father's workplace for the last thirty-two years.

It sometimes chills me to realize that my father has aged along with the building. As the school has disintegrated, and the dust that was once the fabric of support beams, ceilings, and floors has fallen and been swept away, so have the lines on my father's face grown deeper, his hair grown thinner, the magic of his youth dissolved to leave the more subtle wisdom of age.

Generations of students' footsteps echo through the hallways, and the memory of my own voice rattles in my old locker along with all those who used it before and after me.

This school is not just a building. It is certainly not a factory. The school's students have not been widgets, its teachers not assembly workers with blueprints on how to construct the perfect student.

Instead it has been a space where lives have started and been lost, where lessons have been learned with grace and clumsiness, and where the hopeful embers of what could be have been fanned. It has been a place where teenagers have less been poured into a mould than individually opened so their unique talents could breathe. Michelangelo believed his carving released the form yearning to climb from the stone rather than dictated his own vision. The school's teachers have tried to be such artists.

On Sunday, an editorial in these pages called many public teachers in this state "whiners" and "academic deadbeats" because they oppose Governor Owens' methods of school reform. The columnist implied that teachers were more interested in preserving their luxurious jobs than what their students learned.

Cynicism and name-calling is not surprising these days, but it's still disappointing.

U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley explains that there is a \$32,000-a year income gap between experienced teachers holding a master's degree and their counterparts in other fields. Since the average teacher salary in Colorado is not much higher than that, Colorado public school teachers could likely double their income if they switched careers.

No teacher educates for the money. Teaching is a labor of love.

To earn extra money for our family my father cleaned people's homes, delivered newspapers at 4 a.m., and painted houses. And he did so not only for his own children. He did so because he wanted to help other parents' children learn.

Yeah, it's a job. He chose it. But he chose it because he loved to teach and had the talent to impact teenagers. He chose it because he believed that all children should have a free and excellent education.

So offer me no ludicrous comments about how easy teachers have it; how they "whine" in order to keep standards low, kids ignorant, and their pensions intact when they are really expressing true concerns for public education. You may not agree with them, but to dismiss their knowledge and beliefs as strategies to cover their own rear ends is shameful.

If you're going to question a teacher's commitment, you'd better have a darn good argument. And that argument better contain more than his or her opposition to charter schools, vouchers, and revering the Colorado Student Assessment Program.

Why tell this story? It is not to place my father on a pedestal, but rather to point out how many public educators are like him, daily pouring their souls into their work.

My old high school is on the verge of being replaced and a new school will finally arrive. My father will never teach there. He will retire the spring before it opens. His last class will be at the old school where he began, where he spent a lifetime, where he left his youth, where the lines on his face grew deeper from commitment, and where, on occasion, you can still here the echoes of the students he helped guide.

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