

# Teacher asks support, empathy for schools

To the Editor:

I am proud to have one of the most important jobs in the world — I teach, and I am also proud to be a part of a tremendous faculty — the Oberlin School District. We are diverse in many ways, such as interests and ages, but we are all teachers committed to the children of this community.

We started the school year knowing the financial crisis of our district, but we wrote our lesson plans and welcomed our students back to school because that's what we do — we teach. Since the first day of school, we have continued to do amazing things in our classrooms because we have the tremendous responsibility of teaching children. We will continue to do our jobs because we are dedicated professionals. The average teacher of the Oberlin district has 15 years' experience in this district alone and 6.5 years of college. We are dedicated to this community and our profession.

However, for some, we are "part-time workers who get paid a full-time salary with full-time benefits." After all, we work only nine months of the year. It has always amazed me that if teaching is such an easy, part-time job, why doesn't every person in America choose to teach — 8:30 - 3:30, nine months a year with a Christmas break and a spring break?

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American worker puts in 1,978 hours a year. The average teacher works 1,884 hours, which does not include the extra hours for coaching, directing plays or musicals, producing a yearbook, serving on school committees, or working ball games or other school activities. The average teacher who coaches just one sport or activity works 2,176 hours a year.

I asked Coach Dreher how much time he spends with his family during wrestling — besides Sunday, maybe 6-10 hours a week. Because of his teaching responsibilities, he often leaves the house before his kids are up.

Unless you've asked, you probably don't realize the time involved in organizing a scholar bowl, a music festival, or a speech tournament, but Miss Moxter, Mrs. Nelson, or Miss Davis can tell you.

I have no idea what it is like to be a mail carrier. I have no idea how heavy the mail bag is or how many miles our postal carrier walks. I've often wondered how many pairs of shoes he goes through in a year. I've often wondered how he endures 100 degree weather and sub-zero temperatures. The only way to know the answers is to ask.

One of the reasons we teach great literature in schools is to learn and practice the skill of empathy — imagining what it's like in someone else's shoes. My favorite character, Atticus Finch, tries to teach this to his children in "To Kill a Mockingbird." He says, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Fifty-eight percent of teachers leaving secondary schools and 74 percent of those leaving elementary schools cited workload as a reason for leaving. In fact, depending on the location, anywhere from 35 to 50 percent of all teachers do not stay in the profession beyond the first five years. What I find even more alarming is that at least 75 percent of teachers who leave the classroom are considered "highly effective."

In short, it's the good teachers who leave. Why? Research shows that contrary to popular belief, salary is not the No. 1 reason — workload, lack of respect for the profession, working conditions, and relationships with students and parents are often the top reasons.

I'm not only a teacher; I'm a mother of three boys. Two of them are in school with the best teachers in the world. I thank God for them every day. They spend more time with my boys in a day than I do.

For seven hours every day, we trust our teachers with the most precious and priceless things we have — our children. Think about what a great responsibility we give these people. I know that if my sons have a bad morning or are worried about something, Ms. Tacha and Mrs. Pavlicek will have extra hugs for them. I know it. I count on it. I cannot imagine a more important job in the world than teaching and caring about my children.

Oh yes, teachers not only teach, we care. We love our students, "our kids." We cry with them, we laugh with them, we cheer with them. We give them tools for the future, skills for everyday living, and hugs — because sometimes that's what they need more than anything. We listen

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to them, we praise them, we scold them, we teach them, we love them.

Call me selfish but I don't want my children in a class with 25 other students. Children deserve and need more attention from their teachers than that. With larger class sizes, the children will get shortchanged — all children will, and I don't want that for my kids.

The more children in a classroom, the less time a teacher has with each child — it's that simple.

Now I know many of us went to school with 25 or more in a classroom, and we turned out OK, right? Heck, they used to put eight or more grades in a classroom with one teacher. I know. My mother was one of those teachers, but that was almost 50 years ago. Surely, we want more for our kids?

Think of the changes in our world in the last 50 years, even in the last 10. Think of the changes and events in the United States alone. The world has accumulated more information during the past 30 years than in the previous 5,000, and now the amount of information doubles every four to seven years.

My classroom in 2004 doesn't compare with my mother's in the 1950s and 60s. Our world has demanded more advanced science and math classes, more foreign language, more special education, more computer and Internet classes, more early childhood education, global and ethnic classes, and drug and alcohol abuse classes, and then on top of all that, we deal with high-stakes assessment tests.

My generation learned the alphabet, colors, and how to tie shoes in kindergarten; today's children are encouraged to know these things before entering school. The concepts my husband teaches in seventh-grade math I learned as a freshman. The way we teach has had to change, too. If you haven't been inside our schools lately, I'd invite you to visit a classroom.

I'd also invite you to look at our schools' curriculum and class schedules. I've heard the comments that our district hasn't made the necessary cuts when enrollments have continually dropped, but I'd argue that we have made cuts. At one time we had four and a half English teachers. We now have three. We had two shop teachers, now we have one; three science teachers (two and half now), two home economics teachers (one-half now), two and a half music teachers at the high school (two now), and a full-time tutor.

The best proof that our district has dealt with lower enrollments is in the English Department — the only subject that has always been required for four years. We now have three English teachers, and next year, we'll have two and a half. At the grade school, we've gone from 24 teachers to 19. We have made cuts because of lower enrollments.

An increase in state and federal requirements has meant an increase in teachers. When many of my students' parents went to school, they needed 20 units to graduate from high school — 11 electives and 9 required units: four units of English, two of social studies, one science, one math, and one physical education. Ten years ago, the requirements had increased to 12 required units with eight electives: four English, three social science, two math, two science, and one PE. By 1995, the number of credits needed for graduation had increased to 22.

These are still the requirements the 2003-2004 high school handbook, with half a credit of speech added for next year's freshmen. However, the state Board of Regents recommends for admission into one of the six regent universities the following: four English, three social studies, three math, three science, and one unit of computer technology. According to the Kansas Department of Education web site, students "are also strongly encouraged to take a mathematics course every year of high school, and a foreign language." Our school has to offer classes to meet these recommendations, and these upper-level courses require more teachers.

For the Class of 2009, this year's seventh graders, the recommendations listed above become requirements for graduation with the addition of one fine arts unit (vocal, band, or art). We have to provide these classes, and because of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind," we have to provide a "highly qualified" teacher for every class.

I hear people say "we need to go back to the basics — if things could

just be the way they used to be."

This isn't going to happen. As Jamie Vollmer, a former corporate executive, writes, "America has moved from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. People who demand schools go back to the three R's forget that today's students also need the three T's: thinking, technology, and teamwork skills." Businesses and employers tell us they want employees who know how to work in teams; they want employees with communication skills, computer skills, organizational skills, and leadership skills. Who is responsible for teaching these things?

Vollmer shows that schools have never done a better job. Standardized test scores have never been higher. Graduation rates have never been higher, and the average IQ of junior high school kids is seven points higher than their parents and 14 higher than their grandparents.

We are doing our job. We are teaching more subjects to higher levels in more creative ways than ever before.

"I support education, but I don't want to pay any more taxes." I've heard this many times since the local option budget election a month ago, and I can understand this. No one wants more taxes. But if you do support education, then I assume you have talked or written our state and federal representatives voicing your complaints. If you support education, I assume you have tried to come up with a new way to fund education, because increasing property taxes isn't working. I assume you attended the town meeting at the courthouse a few weeks ago and asked our state officials what they are going to do to fund education.

If you support education, I assume you were at the last school board meeting to lend your support to teachers and school board members who have been faced with many difficult and important decisions. And I assume that if you support education, you have called your children's teachers to voice your support and concerns.

My kids deserve the best. Your kids, grandkids, every kid — they deserve a teacher who cares about them, worries about them, wants the very best for them. Every single position that has been cut is a vital part of our school, but our school board had to cut \$380,000. I appreciate the board's difficult decisions.

What do these cuts mean? Most districts our size have a half-time nurse and a half-time counselor and maybe one and a half P.E. teachers. Since when have we wanted to be like most other districts? We're not like other districts. For starters, our county ranks first in the entire state for number per capita of completed suicides, and yet three members of our crisis team, the two school counselors and the school nurse, have been reduced to half time.

Who's going to take care of my son when he gets sick at school or gets hurt on the playground, and I can't get there right away? Who's going to counsel the kid I find slumped against the locker who hates life and thinks no one cares about him? How are the special education teachers going to have the time their students need and deserve when their caseloads increase?

Reading is one of our school's goals for improvement, and we have to eliminate a librarian. Who better to help improve reading than a librarian? How are we going to provide our students with new technology? We're already behind. We've always prided ourselves on setting the standard — not following.

I don't have the answers — I wish I did — but I know we need to support our schools. It's the one way to attract young families back to Oberlin, families like the Dan Grafels, the Bo Farris, the Tucker Woolseys. As former students of mine, I know they want and expect the best schools for their children.

We need your support. Twenty-nine teachers in this district have ties to this community; many of those are Decatur Community High grads or have a spouse tied to this area.

We are a vital part of this community. We own businesses and employ others. We farm. We teach Sunday school and Bible school. We serve on community and church councils. We belong to civic groups and clubs. We pay taxes. We call Oberlin home.

Please ask questions. Empathize. Attend board meetings. Contact our state representatives. Support education.

Brenda Breth, Oberlin

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