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Confession and repentance; perceptions and realities

How teachers influence what people think about the schools

By Howard Meharg, Editor, NW-Notes

A few days ago I was brought up short by the revelation that close friends of mine, not in the teaching profession, had the impression that I disliked my job and, even worse, didn't like the kids I taught.

I was shocked! I really do love my work. I truly believe I would choose this profession again if given the opportunity to start over. Not only that, but I defend vigorously the kids I teach. Every year so many of them become like a part of my family for a period of time.

I think I know how the perception of my friends was developed. They've heard me gripe and moan about student behavior. I've complained about paperwork. I hated it when the bond issue failed. I've recited a litany of silly things kids have done and complained about lack of responsibility, kids not showing up for performances and my frustrations with all of this. I'll bet I've played into the popular press stories implying we work in a jungle, that gunplay is a daily occurrence, that our halls are fraught with danger. Mostly, we teachers are the last bastions of decency and order in this society on its way to hell. I'm some kind of hero, unsung! (No pun intended.) The more I played the role of hero, the better I liked it. I'm a regular John Wayne saving his world.

Unfortunately, I was like the guy who said he loved mankind, it was just individuals he couldn't stand. I was defending public education on one hand and railing about the foibles of individuals and my frustrations on the other. No wonder my friends had the perception I was unhappy with it all!

A report written by the Association for Public Relations for schools in Washington state said that students, teachers, and other staff members provide the largest part of the information people use as they develop their views about schools.

OK, the war stories are fun. Our kids do a stupid thing or two now and then. Negative attitudes have a virtual gravitational pull on us, it seems. But a bit of perspective tells me that I need to tell more than my frustrations to those outside the profession. For one thing, we better be darn careful about confidentiality issues as it relates to anything we say about kids. Even with that issue aside, for our own sake we must combat the teacher lunchroom

gripe mentality and look to and tell of the fantastic good things that happen every day.

I had a talented kid in my choir who was as scatterbrained and irresponsible as any I had ever taught. I loved him one minute and wanted to boot him out of the choir the next. For some reason he fixated on singing a Mozart aria at music contest. He worked so hard on this that he won a state solo contest and got a scholarship to study music in college. In the process he became a strong and positive leader in choir. His foibles were so many (and at times so irritating)!

Which story do I tell? My choice adds to all the others I've made in helping form the perceptions my friends hold. Teacher and school staff views are a powerful force.

I have confessed. *I have repented.* No, seriously! This is serious stuff. We have got to become positive advocates for schools in a day when "crisis mentality" is common. That's my pledge and I'm sticking to it. If I'm going to be obnoxious, it's going to be because people will get tired of hearing the great stuff going on in our schools.

This article first appeared in UNISON (WAACDA, 1995), the year I retired from full time work in the schools. I assure you I have kept my pledge. My superintendent, Dr. Nick Seaver (Longview, WA), read this when it first came out and has used my story extensively in talking with local school staffs. I wouldn't dare be caught speaking negatively now! HM