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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

Is there a Teacher in this Class?
Peter Smagorinsky

On the morning of May 24, Maureen Downey published "[Rockdale student: Make students work for grades and limit reliance on technology](#)" in her *AJC* Get Schooled blog. The essay was written by Jennifer Lee, a 15-year-old sophomore at the Rockdale Career Academy charter school in Conyers. Jennifer wrote what I consider to be a mature and well-reasoned essay expressing her view that technology was producing lazy minds among her peers, and that along with other "security nets" such as summer school and credit recovery, they should be removed so that students may become more responsible for their actions and their consequences.

As of noon or so on May 25, there have been 53 "comments" posted in response to Jennifer's essay. I am moved to write today after reading all 53, not so much to react to what they say, but to comment on what they don't say, and what that says about how readers think about public education.

First, what they do say. A wise man once opined that in reading anonymous internet comments following op-ed pieces, you may as well stop after the first ten or so, because everything after that either serves as a soapbox speech on the author's favorite (and only) topic, or involves a flaming critique of another commenter. There's plenty in what follows Jennifer's essay to support that point of view.

Some commenters agree with Jennifer, some don't; some consider her naïve, some defend her right to her opinion; some critique Jennifer for obviously being privileged, others wonder why anyone would try to shoot down an earnest teenager for having an opinion; some state their opinion of government intervention in our lives; some flame Maureen for not running articles on their preferred topics (although if they'd write good ones themselves, she might); some refer to the good old days of their own education when life was simpler and better; some criticize the teaching profession, and some criticize colleges of education for not preparing better teachers; some speak out against grade inflation; and a lot of them throw nasty stink bombs at other commenters for their comments or tone of their remarks.

Here's what nobody says: Wow, that teacher sure did a great job. Maureen introduces Jennifer as a student in the class of Joanna Anglin, and notes that Joanna was the Georgia Council of Teachers of English state Teacher of the Year in 2011. I don't know how many English teachers there are in Georgia in grades 7-12, but I bet there are a whole lot, and Joanna was judged by her peers to be Best in Show last year. She's won a lot of other teaching awards as well, [as this article reports](#), including one for being the Rockdale County Technology Integrating Teacher of the Year. I single this honor out because Jennifer's essay is very much anti-technology. So you

can't say that Joanna's students are obligated to write opinions that please their teacher's politics and sensibilities. Rather, what they need to do is argue their points responsibly.

Now, I'm Joanna's doctoral program advisor at UGA, so I do have a dog in this fight. I've also coauthored two studies with her, one that took place in her classroom; and I've included examples of her teaching in my own publications about how to teach writing ([she is featured in this book](#)). I acknowledge my own self-interest in bragging that she's a first-rate teacher and is learning how to become a first-rate educational researcher. So there, I've already gotten the ball rolling by flaming myself, albeit rather generously.

My point in writing, however, is not the aggrandizement of Jennifer, Joanna, or myself. Rather, it's to point out that even people who write admiringly of Jennifer seem to think that she produced her essay on talent alone, or has become a skilled writer solely on the basis of her privileged social status. I don't know Jennifer; I don't know if she lives in a trailer home or in Lakeview Estates. All I do know is that she has written an impressive, well-argued essay, not just for a 15-year-old but for anyone entering these debates. I wonder how many of her readers and commenters could come up with something better. I say this not because I entirely agree with her, but because I think that she expresses her views cogently and clearly, and does so using examples and evidence from a nice combination of her personal observations of her peers and from sources she's consulted.

How did she learn to write arguments so effectively? Not just by being talented, which she surely is. Rather, somebody taught her to write that way. Although I haven't been able to visit Joanna's classroom, I'm very familiar with how she teaches. Joanna doesn't just give writing assignments. She carefully analyzes the goals of her teaching and designs activities and writing opportunities that walk students through a sequence of understandings that they'll need in order to produce particular types of writing: narratives, arguments, and so on. She also allows for response and revision so that students' writing is developed as a process involving many steps. It's no wonder that her students write so articulately.

But in this era of teacher-bashing, Joanna's teaching drew no comment whatsoever, even when she and her accomplishments served as part of the essay's preface from Maureen. People who liked the essay praised the writer's innate abilities and personal insight. Nobody seems to acknowledge that teaching writing is hard work for teachers, both in instructional design and the time it takes to grade well over a hundred essays and provide feedback to each student that is meaningful and useful. It's much easier to assume that educators are all incompetent boobs and that only the lucky few like Jennifer can learn in spite of the teaching they must endure in those government schools.

I know Joanna well enough to know that a lot of Jennifer's success followed from some dedicated teaching. I know a lot of other English teachers in this state who bring the same knowledge, commitment, and passion to their work. Without such teachers in English and other subjects, a lot of smart kids would not be performing at such high levels. The fact that their outstanding performance gets crushed in the overwhelming negativity that surrounds schools in general saddens me greatly. There's a lot of great teaching going on in our schools, if only we

could see it through the vile rhetorical fog that obscures the public vision of what I consider to be one of our nation's greatest assets: its public school system.