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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.

Great Georgia Teachers: Beyond the Test Scores
David Ragsdale, Clarke Central HS
by Peter Smagorinsky

Teachers sure are taking a beating these days. Not all teachers, however. If you're in a private school or charter school, you must be pretty danged good. No, it's just the teachers with the hardest jobs who get the abuse heaped on them, day after day, by the great and small, named and anonymous: those in regular old public schools.

Teachers are subjected to increasingly urgent calls for accountability, no doubt because those high salaries and other cushy benefits need to be justified in the most rigorous, reliable, and valid of ways. No, make that way, not ways: The only measure of successful teaching these days is their students' test scores. Everything that teachers do on behalf of kids can easily be boiled down to those scores, regardless of whether or not those kids have fridge full of healthy food or a clean change of clothes at home; or for that matter, a home at all.

Or, maybe teachers can be appreciated for other things that they do. In this series of columns, I'd like to feature teachers I know of who do extraordinary work, often with kids whose life circumstances do not predict college attendance or other arenas where test scores matter to them enough to do their best. What I hope to accomplish is to provide profiles of outstanding teachers without referring to their ability to train students to fill in bubbles on machine-scored answer sheets.

Today I'll talk about a guy I really like and admire, David Ragsdale of Clarke Central HS in Athens. I first met David when he was working on his master's degree at UGA and took some classes with me. I was always pleased to find him in my classes because of the ripple effect he had on other students. It's pretty hard to be in a class with someone of boundless inquisitiveness and vigor, and not get caught up in the momentum yourself. He set a high standard for engagement and participation that inevitably gave the classes vitality and purpose—certainly for me as a teacher, and I believe also for the other students in the class, many of whom, like David, were coming to campus after a demanding and often exhausting day of teaching their own classes in Georgia schools.

David has taken a special interest throughout his teaching and education in the quality of learning experienced by students from low socioeconomic status groups. There are many such students in Athens, which is one of the nation's poorest counties. David has made the academic success of such young people his mission in life. In a community in which the public schools experience unfortunately high dropout rates, David's ability to find ways to teach students in meaningful ways is critically important in helping the district meet its goal of serving a broad

and diverse population. With his unbridled passion for social justice, David has emerged as the sort of teacher that semi-urban districts such as Athens-Clarke County so desperately need.

At UGA, David was among the founding Fellows in the Red Clay Writing Project, a select group of teachers from North Georgia whose experiences laid the groundwork for the RCWP institutes that followed. RCWP is an affiliate of the National Writing Project, often described as the most important professional development program available to teachers interested in writing instruction. David quickly took a leadership role in the RCWP, based on the strong impression he made on his university and K-12 colleagues, returning each summer as an institute leader. He is also a valuable recruiter for the RCWP, visiting summer classes to explain to other graduate students the advantages of participation and the processes experienced during the institute. With his tremendous interpersonal skills and infectious enthusiasm, along with his expertise as a teacher of writing, he often impresses a number of students into applying for Fellowships the following summer.

Locally, David has also become a key part of the UGA undergraduate program in English Education as a mentor teacher. David's gifts as a teacher and mentor are well-known throughout the local teaching community; we often hear students in our master's degree classes refer to him as an exceptional and model instructor. His generous and caring mentorship is most appreciated by our teacher candidates, who are often fragile and require sensitive handling in order to weather the vicissitudes of school life. It's well known that many teachers leave the profession within their first few years of teaching. Having strong mentorship during student teaching helps early-career teachers develop the resilience that they need to remain in the classroom in spite of the obstacles. David therefore plays a key role in both the careers of teacher candidates, and ultimately in the administration of schools that are able to hire teachers whose abilities and dispositions enable them to thrive as educators.

I have saved his most remarkable achievement for last. David has had astounding success as the faculty advisor to Clarke Central High School's news magazine, *Odyssey*, and its literary magazine, *Iliad*. He has not merely advised these publications, however; he is the founder of both. Amazingly, before David came along, CCHS had allowed its only literary magazine to fall into dormancy, and had never before published a news magazine. David saw the need for students to take pride in and have outlets for their writing, and so revived the *Iliad* and launched the *Odyssey*. Taking this initiative in a school in which student writing was so little appreciated reveals much about David's spirited optimism and faith in his students in a setting in which many have simply given up on students' prospects for achievement. Serving as advisor to one or the other of these publications would be an onerous amount of work; founding and advising both while pursuing graduate studies and being a key player in the RCWP is simply remarkable.

Each of these magazines has, under David's dynamic leadership, risen to national prominence in very short order. The number of awards that these journals annually receive is far too long to list here, but if you're interested in what Clarke Central students have achieved under his guidance, look [here](#), or [here](#), or [here](#), or [here](#), or [here](#), or in many other places. Or better yet, send him a contribution, because he's done all this for the most part without a budget, relying instead on the generosity of regular folks to pony up the occasional sawbuck to keep the operation rolling. David has always modestly deferred credit to his student editors, but without a faculty advisor of considerable talent and dedication, students could not prosper in these roles. The remarkable series of accolades that his students' magazines have accumulated can only be the work of a professional of magnificent devotion and ability, especially given the absence of a tradition of student publications in his school.

What are his students' test scores? I have no idea, and I don't care. They cannot begin to take the measure of the man or what he's done for kids in Athens/Clarke County. David is a great teacher because he does so much more than teach. He works as hard as anyone I know, even spending his summers teaching in the Governor's Honors Program in Valdosta. David is smart, dynamic, boundlessly determined, and a great asset to every institution he becomes a part of. We need more like him; I can only hope that the current toxic environment that surrounds our public schools does not run off those of similar gifts who might some day join him in the classroom.