

Note: This essay was originally published as Smagorinsky, P. (2012, March 5). If you kill the heart and soul of a school, what's left? *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Available at <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2012/03/05/if-you-kill-the-heart-and-soul-of-a-school-what%e2%80%99s-left/>

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.

If you Kill the Heart and Soul of a School, What's Left?

Peter Smagorinsky

Maybe it's the election year; maybe it's the times; maybe it's the zeitgeist. Everyone seems to have an opinion about education, and the stronger the better. And the more money behind the opinion, the more likely it'll become a policy.

There is one group of people that is entirely ignored when it comes to developing educational policies that have authenticity, relevance, viability, and other attributes of authority in the school setting. This population has been, over time, abused, reviled, belittled, undermined, and disrespected; and presently is under greater attack than ever before. At the same time, this population knows more about schools than any other group on earth, understands teaching and students' learning better than anyone else, has a greater investment in schools than the policymakers who govern the institutions, and works harder on behalf of students than anyone in the profession. That group is the faculty.

Teachers are the heart and soul of every school. Students are guaranteed to be gone within 2-6 years. Many administrators come and go without staying long enough to make an impact, except on their own career trajectories. At one school at which I taught, in my seven years of employment we had three different principals. I have visited schools in rural Oklahoma where the principalship turns over every year or two as people use the position as a springboard to bigger and better jobs. Parents' interest tends to come and go as their children move through the system, and many taxpayers without children believe that they needn't support schools, since they personally get nothing from them.

The one constant is the faculty, which makes a dedicated commitment to the community that spans decades. The institutional role played by teachers is more responsible for the culture and continuity of the school community than are the contributions of anyone else. In spite of this extraordinary career dedication to schools and their kids, teachers are the ones whose perspective is rarely consulted, and of late, they are the ones who take all of the blame whenever anything varies from the script established by policymakers, no matter how unrealistic that script might be.

Teachers are the heart and soul of every school because they are the ones with the longest, most dedicated commitment and term of service to the institution. It seems to me that creating conditions that make teaching a satisfying profession should thus be the center of any educational policy.

Presently, teachers are controlled administratively through threats and other disincentives. They tend to be treated like children, and bad children at that. That seems like a very strange way to treat the lifeblood of the institution by those who come and go over time. A new poll finds that teacher morale is very low, confirming what news stories tell us every day. Many of the most dynamic teachers are now leaving the profession in alarming numbers.

Treating teachers with greater respect, creating less intrusive work conditions, and providing teachers with a strong voice in how schools are run would help restore morale so that, even if the salaries are not high, faculty members are able to make the difference that so many people seek to make upon choosing the teaching profession in the first place.