On Being Not Quite Ready to Retire

Even after 28 years, the rewards of the daily fray look attractive.

I am not quite ready to retire. I must admit I am peripherally attracted to those "get ready" articles in professional journals, and my school board offers attractive retirement incentives. I even attended a seminar in which a charming young woman tried to convince me that my tax bracket would be decreased and I could live comfortably for the rest of my life if only I chose the right option at the right time. But somehow those messages don't move me. I'm less tempted by glorious visions of a secure leisure than I am by the daily excitement of the carnival called school. I love going to school every morning, and I still get a kick out of hobnobbing with healthy, high-strung, unpredictable kids in their ridiculous earrings and haircuts and bizarre outfits.

I look forward to what each day will bring: Can I solve its inevitable problems? Will I be able to complete yet another state education department report, with 15 copies due in two weeks? (Who are those 15 people in Albany who read all this junk, I wonder.) Will an irate or a grateful or a confused parent seek my counsel today? Will the air conditioning work in my windowless office? Will the mail bring new challenges and maybe some good news? Will my faithful secretary proudly announce that we've conquered all the bedeviling bugs in our computer? Will colleagues, in and out of my office all day, bring tidbits of gossip, important educational information, professional news about a curriculum or a personnel issue we're working on? Will the handicapped students and their teachers, who are my special responsibility, make my day great or grim? Will the superintendent call with another exciting project she wants me to work on?

You see my problem—too much is going on. Yet I want to say some things in print (meaning in public) that I would say if I were retiring. Who knows? At this rate I may be too old to write when I finally decide to go.

Unexpected Rewards

I want to say what it has meant to me to spend my professional life as an educator in the public schools, to convey the truly inexplicable, incomparable exultation I felt when I taught a pipsqueak of a child how to read. I want others to know the pride I felt when one of my students was accepted by an Ivy League college—a student
burned out, dissatisfied, overworked, and underappreciated.

The Drawbacks
Teaching hasn’t been all wonderful, of course. Some terrible soul-searching morblings I was caught between my own daughter—coughing and wanting Mommy to stay home with her—and 23 students primed for a field trip they couldn’t take without me. Occasionally “idiot” proclamations from on high forced me to use strategies in my classes that I considered educationally unsound.

There were some children, parents, and colleagues whose concepts of right and wrong were diametrically opposed to my own. And I believe even now, as an administrator with a good salary, that my compensation is considerably less than it would have been in industry or in any other comparable profession. I also believe that, in the world outside public school, I never had much status as a teacher. It’s a shame that I had to leave the classroom for that.

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Reflections and a Look Ahead
But then it was Monday morning, 28 years later. I had gone from teacher to counselor to administrator, all in the same district. I had worked with dozens of board members, five superintendents, countless teachers and principals, and hundreds of children. Oh those children—so eager, so dear, so curious—who wanted to like and be liked, to respect and be respected, to appreciate and be appreciated.

I have been more than lucky. I work in a community whose main concern is its school system. Despite changes in population, increases and then decreases in enrollment, swings of the educational pendulum—from the back-to-basics 70s to the innovative 80s to the back-to-basics 70s to the education-at-risk 80s—this district has been beamed toward excellence. This district has honored me. It has encouraged my growth, rewarded my ambition, and recognized my zeal and commitment. Along the fast trip from 1957 to 1986, I have received enough accolades, thank you’s, and strokes to last a lifetime.

Because of my help, lots of students can read, count, and write; they are making their way in the world. Because of my help, lots of kids and parents with problems were able to deal with growing up and adolescence. Because of my help, special education and handicapped children are getting a fair shake at an appropriate free education. There’s enough stuff here and enough years here to make up a dandy retirement package.

As you can see, I have my retirement speech practically all written. But how can I retire? The phone is ringing; the problems keep pouring in; three people are waiting to see me. We have to get the “jocks” to be more humble. We have to get other students off drugs and high on life. We have to design meaningful ways for teachers and students to accept and integrate handicapped children into the mainstream of school life.

We have to ensure computer availability and literacy for all our students. We have to institute all-day kindergarten and after-school centers for children with working and single parents. We have to work with industry to develop effective vocational options for high school graduates. We have to improve the math and science curriculum for all students. We have to make America’s public schools the best they can be.

There’s so much to do. I don’t have time to retire right now.□

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