

An Open Letter to Teachers Everywhere



I am troubled.

As an educator, as a parent and as an activist, I am deeply troubled as I rethink public education and struggle to reconcile ideology with reality in our nation's classrooms and schools.

Collectively, I hear educators—and parents and politicians and others—say children are our future. We say that we want students to think critically, that we want them to be problem-solvers, to ask questions, to challenge us to make the world a better place.

And yet I see educators setting aside these high aspirations, choosing safety and compliance over boldness and creativity. I see educators silenced by the fear of professional disfavor and criticism.

I want a revolution of hope. I want educators to seize a golden opportunity to rethink the nature and purpose of public education.

A revolution that eliminates the hands-off practice of urging students to resolve their own problems while leaving students vulnerable to bullying

BY RHONDA THOMASON

ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

“I want a revolution of hope.”

and burdened with issues too huge for them to ever resolve. A revolution that no longer supports sanctions that allow educators to ignore bullying or harassment when it echoes one’s own personal biases. A revolution that eliminates sanctioned school prayers that favor a particular religion and affirms the acceptance of students with differing beliefs.

Imagine such a revolution.

Imagine an educational system in which educators invoke standards of compassion, empathy, action and reason as they question the deep regularities that suppress achievement.

Imagine the power of educators valuing dissent and affirming what students *can* achieve rather than magnifying what they *can’t*.

Imagine educators giving ourselves permission to be vulnerable learners acknowledging that our judgment might be biased. Imagine us inviting troubling, courageous conversations that have the power to move us beyond our confidence and challenge our own assumptions and biases.

Imagine listening deeply to parents and students willing to help us get to know the “inside” of their experiences. Imagine unveiling ingrained stereotypes in order to create communities of belonging, abundance and trust.

Imagine competent educators who deserve and command autonomy and respect—and then use it to create classrooms of equality and sharing, where *all* students find their cultures reflected in the stories teachers tell, the languages they speak and the facts textbooks reveal.

As an educator, I often skated on the edge of revolution and compliance. While compliance may secure careers and livelihoods, it can leave teachers depleted, students tested rather than taught and marginalized rather than empowered. Compliance feeds mediocrity. Boldness is a catalyst for grassroots revolution—a revolution that serves our students as they enter the challenges of a wonderful and sometimes cruel world.

May we become a nation that again values public education as a pathway to

equity and achievement. And through the small daily revolutionary actions of critical educators, may we insist that our voices and actions serve to empower this generation to create a better world.

May we become educators who seek out students’ experiences, interests and talents as a means of engagement, and may our passion empower those who have little power. Authentic caring is a powerful force, and it always is worth the cost. ♦

Thomason is a retired teacher who has worked with both Teaching Tolerance and Welcoming Schools. She lives in Montgomery, Alabama. Thomason’s open letter first appeared in the Fall 2008 issue of Teaching Tolerance.

