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LESSONS FROM AMERICA'S TOP TEACHERS

2005 State Teachers of the Year speak out on closing the achievement gap, the state of the profession, and what *really* works in the classroom.



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ELIZABETH F. DAY, NY



KATHY S. RANK, OH



TESSIE E. ADAMS, LA



RONNIE STANFORD, AK



NIKKI SALVATICO, PA



PAULA E. CONLEY, ID

“Teachers are the builders of bridges.

We help students develop both their cognitive and emotional skills. What we do and say, the ways we act, and the passion we show for our profession are laying the foundation for our students' futures. It is important for us to acknowledge the profound responsibility of our profession and treat it with great seriousness. Each day we walk into a classroom should be a day that we lay another link in the bridge that will help students develop into competent and successful human beings.” —Paula E. Conley, *Idaho Teacher of the Year*

“In my four decades of teaching,

fads have come and gone, but some lessons about what children need remain constant. Children need to feel emotionally safe, physically comfortable, and intellectually challenged in the classroom. I know that a student who experiences even a moment of humiliation or lack of respect will remember that moment the rest of her life; one of my few rules is to respect the presence and opinions of everyone in the room.” —Vicki Lynn Goldsmith, *Iowa Teacher of the Year; National Teacher of the Year finalist*

“Teaching is the most rewarding profession.

It is intense. It is challenging. It matters. I am proud that many of my students have gone into the profession. Two are teachers at my school. If we are going to close the achievement gap, it is important to recruit an army of exemplary teachers of diverse backgrounds. Over 80 percent of my stu-

dents are people of color. Only 14 percent of public school teachers are people of color.” —Stanley W. Murphy, *California Teacher of the Year; National Teacher of the Year finalist*

“I found my niche teaching at-risk kids.

And I want others to share my passion for teaching the many truly bright students who have been allowed to slip through the cracks because they have reading difficulties. I became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of my students; I just never realized the profound impact they would have on mine.” —Kerri Ann Walukiewicz, *Florida Teacher of the Year*

“Too often the public hears only the negative

stories about education that make the evening news or hit the front page of the newspaper. They hear endless requests for funding or stories of testing and accountability. While all of those things are a reality, there is also story after story of positive strides being taken in our schools. They are the ones I enjoy telling, and they are the stories that bring great hope to our profession.” —Kathy S. Rank, *Ohio Teacher of the Year*

“A report card does not give a vivid picture

of a first-grade reader. It is my job to do just that. It does require going above and beyond the normal reporting system, but then again, if I am doing my job, running my guided reading groups, then my reporting data is at my fingertips.” —Nikki Salvatico, *Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year*

“How heartwarming it is to see

children's eyes light up when I watch them play ball or dance in a recital, or when I drop by for a birthday party. Meeting my students and their families outside the classroom bridges the worlds of school, family, and community and unites us as scholars in a quest for a common goal: lifelong learning.”

—Linda Blanc Winburn, *South Carolina Teacher of the Year*

“After my students have left for the day

I straighten each desk and chair in my classroom. During this quiet time, I ask myself, ‘Did I encourage everyone who entered my classroom today? Did I spark my students' curiosity, inspire them to do more for themselves, or to help someone else?’ I reassure my students and myself that although we sometimes have truly perfect days, we also sometimes fall short. I know, and so my students know, that we can always begin again tomorrow.” —Elizabeth F. Day, *New York Teacher of the Year*

“I am not only a P.E. teacher

but also a teacher of life skills. My modeling sets the tone for my students to always actively participate in life, not just in P.E. class. They know they have choices and they understand the importance of having those choices.” —Kimberly A. Babeu, *Arizona Teacher of the Year*

“My first summer teaching in Alaska

was an eye-opener. I asked the students to play a very fundamental scale. Train wrecks have had ▶

2005 NATIONAL TEACHER OF THE YEAR

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Jason Kamras

7th- and 8th-grade Math teacher, John Philip Sousa Middle School, Washington, D.C.

Instructor: Congratulations—what a wonderful honor. Your students must be so proud. Tell us about them.

Jason Kamras:

I love Sousa, its students, and their families. Like many urban schools, we face a number of challenges, including poverty, drug use, and crime in the students' neighborhoods. But I believe deeply in Sousa's potential for greatness. The famous court case *Bolling v. Sharpe*, which desegregated Washington's public schools, centered around 11 African-American students' wish to go to Sousa. I hope that our school can still serve as an agent for social change.

I: You started *EXPOSE*, an innovative photography program. Tell us more.

JK: When I first started teaching, I was struck by how little my students knew of the larger Capital community and how little Washingtonians knew about my students beyond the negative headlines. Through Sousa's *Expose* program (www.exposeprogram.org), students are introduced to the cultural riches of D.C. through field trips. At the same time, students develop autobiographical photo essays in an effort to expose the larger Washington community to the

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more pleasant sounds. Putting aside my initial expectations, I had to set smaller goals to get where we wanted to be. I quickly learned that teaching is like building a house. You don't put up walls until the foundation is complete and you don't put on a roof until you have the walls. You build one step at a time, one success at a time. The next thing I learned was that when you build on success and praise appropriately, the students begin to love learning, and you'd better get out of their way." —*Ronnie Stanford, Alaska Teacher of the Year*

“I make every effort to be approachable,

reasonable, and open to parents' concerns. I encourage them to allow their children to be responsible for their own choices, and I suggest ways to make homework more fun. This year when a parent expressed to me that her son didn't like homework, I suggested that if he completed his homework satisfactorily, she draw whiskers on her face or wear pigtails to dinner. It worked! Less stress equals more progress." —*Tessie E. Adams, Louisiana Teacher of the Year*

“Open your classroom doors.

Look for people who can enrich and provide resource opportunities: That is my challenge to teachers. And a message to the general public: Walk through the school doors, share, and connect with children. Make a positive difference in the world by helping children learn." —*Heidi Louise Capraro, Michigan Teacher of the Year*

“We live in a microwave society—

one in which people expect everything to happen fast. Students who pass their driver's test expect to receive a new car. College students expect to earn \$100,000 a year upon graduation. Elementary students must learn to read in kindergarten, must be multiplying in second grade, and must

perform pre-algebraic math by middle school. It's important for students to be competitive, but we need to acknowledge that it takes more than knowledge of facts for someone to become a good citizen." —*Christina Ross Daniels, Mississippi Teacher of the Year*

“Laughing classrooms are learning classrooms.

Laughter facilitates healthy relationships and enhances brain function. This allows my students to participate with greater concentration and to release tensions that are so inevitable for children in today's society." —*Susan Illgen, Oklahoma Teacher of the Year*

“I didn't enter teaching to become famous.

Who does? The teaching profession is filled with quiet rewards. When I am out in the community with my family, we are so often in the presence of my former students. Whether by the cashier checking us out at Wal-Mart or the young man who comes to install new flooring in my house, I am often recognized and treated like a celebrity. I believe that success is becoming the best that is in you." —*Linda Louise Eisinger, Missouri Teacher of the Year*

“Give yourselves a pat on the back.

You do a hard job every day, and it is one that molds the future of our society. Get the help and support you need to do your job well. Don't be afraid to ask about situations that stump you—every one of us has them, and it is the support of colleagues and others that helps us to best serve our kids. Keep your heart in it, and when it is no longer there, do something else. And, last of all, have heart. Tough as our times may be, schools really are working hard and getting better and better, and this is thanks to the hard work of all of us in education." —*Karen Heath, Vermont Teacher of the Year* ■

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complexity and richness of the students' own lives.

I: *What inspires you? What drives your teaching?*

JK: Nothing surpasses the joy I feel when a student runs to me and proclaims proudly: "Mr. Kamras, now I get it. That's pretty cool." Participating in my students' learning and celebrating their success exhilarating. But for me, the act of sharing knowledge has a deeper meaning. It is a commitment to equity and opportunity for all children. It is a promise of a better future for those who have been ignored or left behind. In the classroom, this belief translates into an unyielding commitment to excellence. I have extremely high expectations for myself and for my students. Last year's lessons were good, I think. But how can I perfect them this year? I believe this drive to constantly reflect and improve is the principal source of my success as a teacher.

I: *How can we encourage new teachers to take up this challenge?*

JK: The strength of our teaching corps depends upon successful mentoring. I love mentoring because I'm always impressed by new teachers' creativity, commitment, and passion, but also because it is challenging. I am forced to think critically about what I do in the classroom, how I do it, and why I do it.

I: *What more can teachers do to make a difference?*

JK: I have a deep appreciation for the challenging and important work teachers do every day. Teaching is a demanding profession. As educators, though, we sometimes underestimate the power of our collective voice. Policy makers will listen when a teacher speaks. We can amplify that effect by working together to demand the resources we need to educate every American child. ■

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