

# Honoring the Teacher's Perspective

By Natalie Schwartz

When my son was in 3rd grade, the mother of one of his classmates felt the teacher was not challenging her child. To convey her opinion, she shredded her child's homework and returned the pieces to the teacher in a plastic bag with a note admonishing the teacher not to assign her child such simple work again.

I didn't have first-hand knowledge of the incident, and found the story difficult to believe. I was astonished that a parent would treat a teacher with such disrespect. And I wish I could say this was an isolated incident. But, unfortunately, during the past six years that my children have been attending elementary school, I've listened to many parents express concerns and complaints about their children's teachers. I believe that the lack of respect teachers receive stems from the pervasive misconceptions about the teaching profession.

I'm not a teacher, but I was raised by one. My father taught for 33 years at an inner city intermediate school, and as a young child I had the privilege of accompanying him to work on occasion. I marveled at how the students admired him and relied on him. He handled every issue they laid before him, from academic questions to skinned knees. I also remember my father working tirelessly in his basement office after work and on weekends to attain his doctorate in education. Because of my father's dedication to his students and his own academic pursuits, I developed an unwavering respect for teachers and a strong commitment to my education—values I've instilled in my own children.

While I decided to pursue a career in journalism, my sister followed in my father's footsteps and became a teacher. Based on what I've observed my father and my sister experience, I believe there is a major disparity between society's perception of teaching and the reality. Many people believe teachers have low-pressure jobs, work until 3 p.m., and enjoy summers off. To gain insight into teacher's perspective and refute these notions, I interviewed more than 50 teachers around the country. I recounted their stories in my book, *The Teacher Chronicles: Confronting the Demands of Students, Parents, Administrators and Society*.

Although I was familiar with the teaching profession before undertaking *The Teacher Chronicles*, time and again I was shocked, distressed and moved by the stories I heard.

I spoke with a 1st grade teacher in New York City who was thrust into the emotionally draining role of surrogate parent for 30 students. She provided dinner for one of her students regularly because she was concerned the child was not eating enough. When she noticed one student's shoes were so old they were coming apart, she bought the child a new pair of sneakers. At breakfast and lunch time, she looked on as the children turned their trays upside down and tapped them to release every crumb because they were starving. She worried during school vacations that they weren't eating properly. She left after a year due to professional differences with the school's principal and took a job in an affluent suburb, an experience she found more harrowing due to her confrontations with parents. When she required one of her students to complete his work during recess, his parents became upset and demanded a conference with the teacher and principal. During the conference, the child's father said he was inclined to request the teacher take a pregnancy test, indicating that pregnancy would impair her ability to do her job satisfactorily.

I spoke with high school teachers who expressed concern that some parents valued an attractive high school transcript more than a solid education. A 9th grade English teacher in Massachusetts had a student who refused to do her homework, and the parents continuously pressured the teacher to overlook it. A high school history teacher in New Jersey questioned the efficacy of the accommodations he's required to provide for some of his students at the behest of their parents. He creates a special exam for one of his students with three multiple choice questions instead of four. Other students are permitted to take tests over and over until they achieve Bs.

The teachers I interviewed also related the disrespectful behavior they encounter from students. A middle school teacher in California said one of her students demanded the administration fire her because he felt uncomfortable when she announced she was expecting a baby girl. A middle school teacher in New York said one of her students became annoyed when her seat was moved and issued an implied threat: "Do I need to remind you my mother is on the board of education?"

While many parents are supportive and many students are cooperative, the few that are not can cause intense anxiety for teachers.

Teachers encounter pressure from a variety of sources—students, parents, administrators, school boards, and government officials. They tackle heavy workloads and demanding schedules with little downtime. I believe if parents understand the teacher's perspective

they can develop more productive and successful relationships with their children's teachers. Children benefit the most when parents and teachers work together as partners.

The lack of respect teachers receive is not the only problematic issue. Teachers are entrusted with the vital task of educating the future leaders of America, yet many of them are not compensated adequately. Perhaps if taxpayers had a better understanding of the multi-faceted role teachers play in our school systems, they would be more inclined to approve school budgets that support teachers.

I have been heartened by the fact that teachers have found solace and entertainment in the relatable stories contained in *The Teacher Chronicles*. I'm pleased that I could offer something to America's teachers, a legion of dedicated people who work diligently to inspire and motivate our nation's children.

*A freelance writer and editor based in New York, Natalie Schwartz is the author of **The Teacher Chronicles**. She is an active volunteer with the Parent Teacher Association in her local school district. She graduated in 1991 from Cornell University with a bachelor's degree in communication.*