

A Lifetime of Courage: Oregon Teachers at the Crossroad

by Jay Casbon, PhD, Teacher

I started teaching high school almost 30 years ago. I have worked as a teacher and principal in elementary, middle, and high schools. I have taught at the university level, served as a dean of a school of education, and currently serve as the CEO of OSU-Cascades, Oregon's new regional campus in Central Oregon.

►In that time, I have come to yearn for schools at all levels to be models of wisdom as well as knowledge; schools that nurture teacher exuberance, vitality, and passion. When I started my high school teaching career in a culturally diverse and urban setting, I felt empowered to promote academic, social, and personal development for all of my students. I loved engaging students and I deeply valued my own learning as I prepared for each and every instructional day.

My focus was unfettered by outside intrusion. I followed the district's curriculum guide, noted which students needed additional assistance with particular instructional issues—whether it was reading or a personal development challenge. If I needed support in unlocking whatever learning barrier I might encounter with a student, I sought and received assistance. Life was simpler; I devoted my expertise and my heart to the classroom. I had many challenges, many success stories, some lousy moments, but felt grateful that I was lucky enough to work in a profession that used every part of me. I did not feel consumed, I felt utilized and connected to my life's work.

Today's Reality

Today, I find many teachers in our public schools are dazed, frustrated, and dropping out of the profession in record numbers. We lose half of our teachers after 5 years or less in the classroom. The reason they leave has little to do with compensation. They leave because they feel demoralized and marginalized, damaged by a system that is punishing and controlling. They are dispirited by a system that places unrealistic demands on their talents, time, and sense of what an exceptional and imaginative education could be for all of their students.

No wonder so many teachers applauded and identified with Dewey Finn, the fictional substitute teacher in the comical film satire, *The School*

of Rock. Dewey Finn was a one-person wrecking crew to all the dull and deadly school environments that too many teachers and students face each day. Dewey Finn's passion and imagination are in stark contrast to the many huckster-like educational reforms that score political points at the expense of a life-giving education. Dewey Finn is the antidote to the destructive nature of all the overly prescriptive, underfinanced, and short-term school reform efforts of recent years.

Many of our best teachers are struggling with constricted hearts and working in schools that are controlled by strangers who live in far away places. Strangers have replaced the authority of our local school boards, and national policy now controls what our teachers teach. They are being asked to teach from the outside in, following deadening curricula designed to guarantee that students pass fact-based tests. These teachers report they are not allowed to teach in a manner that they know works. Teachers have shared with me a disturbing feeling that our profession is hopelessly overmatched by giant forces that marginalize the teaching profession, view teachers as naïve

cogs, and consider public education as an expense to be contained.

And yet, like Dewey Finn, these teachers dig ever deeper so they can muster the passion, knowledge, and relevance required to unleash the learning every one of our students deserves. Dewey Finn's commitment to his students, incredible ability to listen for clues to their often hidden gifts, and his invitation to novelty, are what our best teachers do every school day, in spite of the mandates and restrictions placed upon them.

Mark Edmundson, a graduate of Medford High School and now a professor of English at the University of Virginia, understood the stakes at play for teachers. He wrote in a recent *New York Times* article:

...genuinely great teaching—the sort of thing that Socrates and his spiritual descendants have delivered—is exactly what the American education establishment is now working to discourage. Many of us are being told that our primary task is to prepare students for fact-based tests, to stuff our charges with information, like a Christmas bird.

Children Left Behind

Nothing more clearly illustrates what Mark Edmundson is writing about than the federally mandated—but largely unfunded—No Child Left Behind Law Act of 2001 (NCLB). This landmark education bill forces every school in the country to succumb to unprecedented federal tampering in areas of test scores, teacher qualifications, and drop-out

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rates. The central core of the legislation is to force all schools to improve test scores—as demonstrated by a bevy of standardized tests—and greatly diminish the drop-out rates of poor and minority students. Schools that fail to meet performance targets are sanctioned in a number of ways, including assisting students to transfer to better-performing schools.

No one I know in the teaching profession wants any child to be left behind. No one I know in Oregon—which, in spite of severe funding issues, out-performs most other states in average SAT scores as well as middle school scores in reading and mathematics—does not feel an absolute commitment to higher achievement expectations, and results, for all students—especially those students who have been traditionally poorly

served by our schools. Oregon teachers are not opposed to accountability measures when they are coupled with powerful instructional designs and sufficient resources. In fact, Oregon educators fully understand that accountability can assist every school with a renewed sense of urgency, and a knowing that comes when teachers operationalize a no-excuse system of instruction.

To accommodate the targets of NCLB without sufficient funding, many Oregon teachers fear their classrooms will become too mechanized—the opposite of what promotes real learning and student success. A one-size-fits-all approach as the basic schema to improved academic outcomes is what many schools will have to settle for when there is a notable lack of credible funding. The heart

of the matter is how we provide more capacity to each and every school, each and every classroom, each and every teacher, and, especially, each and every student.

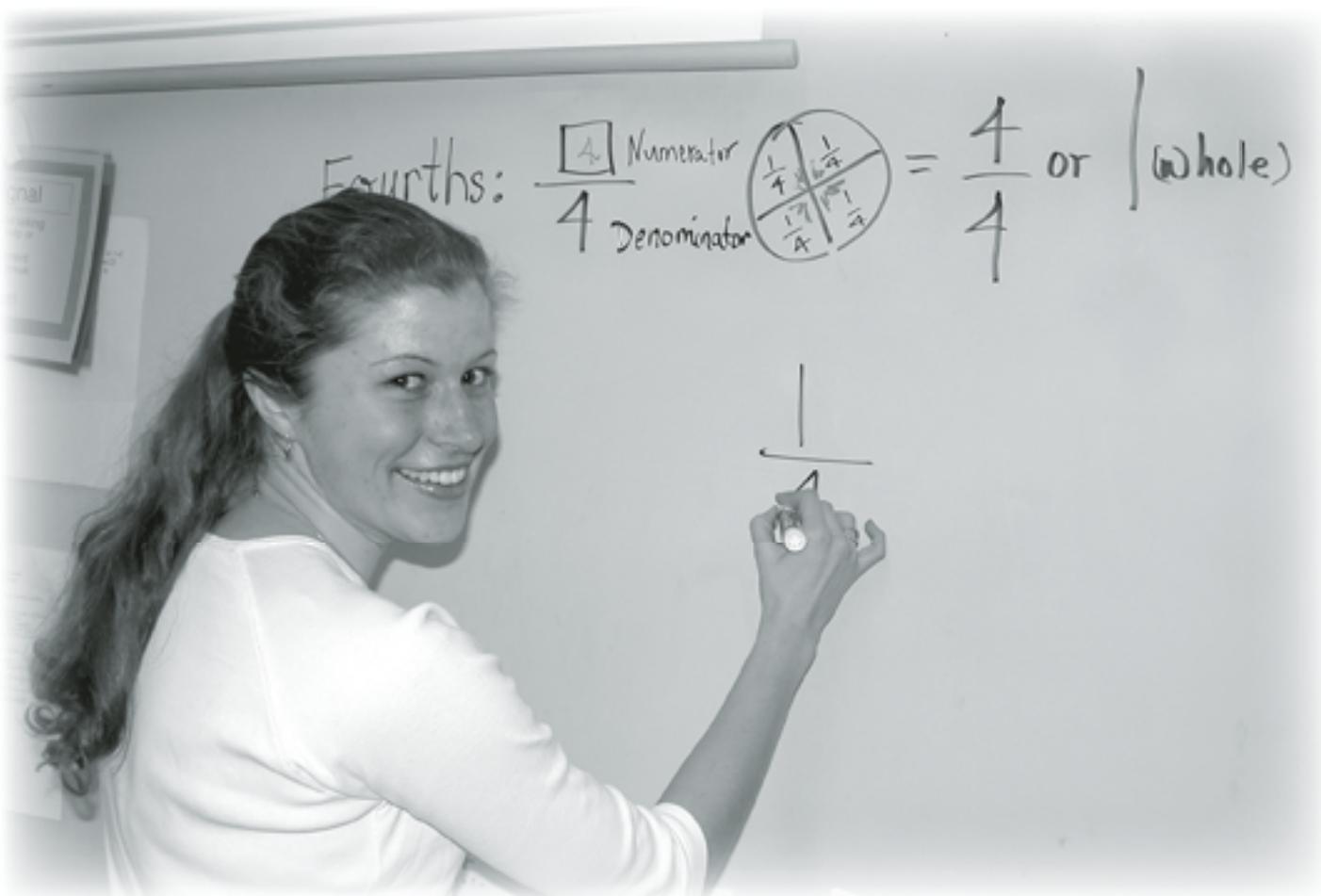
Make no mistake about it, tin-cup funding directly relates to instructional capacity building in our classrooms. Public policy researchers, who have done the basic arithmetic on No Child Left Behind, report that this law amounts to an unfunded mandate. New Hampshire, for example, will receive \$77 per pupil to meet federal requirements. The real cost for implementation exceeds \$500 per student. New Hampshire is now seriously considering litigation, as are other states such as Vermont and Maine. Oregon has not yet “done the math,” but it is unlikely that federal funding will cover the costs of

eliminating the achievement gap or producing overall improved student achievement.

Strategies for the Future

To implement a serious strategy for boosting student achievement, our schools must do the following:

- Place an outstanding teacher in every classroom
- Create a culture of high expectation for student success
- Have smaller classes and smaller schools
- Create mentoring relationships for beginning teachers
- Enhance instructional capacity opportunities for teacher professional development



Lisa Anderson completing her student teaching at Chapman Elementary School. What does the future of teaching hold for her peers?

- Create more time for faculty collaboration
- Implement a highly defined common focus to the curricula
- Implement state-of-the-art assessment and management systems
- Create a school culture that is respectful
- Develop student tutorial centers in every school
- Create innovative and meaningful ways for the community to be deeply involved
- Vastly decrease the emphasis on tests as the main function of the school curriculum

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There are no exceptions!

Outstanding schools are communities of relationships—all manner of relationships, students and teachers, teachers and teachers, students and students, parents with everybody in the school community. These relationships, coupled with precise assessment, form the foundation for real achievement. In such a place, no student or teacher gets lost or is pushed to the fringe of the school community. In such an inviting and interactive culture, everyone is important and fully included.

Exceptions to Emulate

Recently, a dedicated faculty in one of our Oregon high schools decided to assess the depth and scope of relationships they have with their students. They placed the names of all of their students on the wall of their library. The faculty was given an ample supply of red, blue, and yellow dots. Red dots were placed by the names of students the faculty knew well. Blue dots were placed by the names of students they could

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recognize in person but did not know well. Yellow dots were placed by the names of students where just the student name was recognized. The exercise took an hour and a half and the results were stunning.

The faculty discovered to their horror that 32 percent of their students received no dots whatsoever. No one knew these students! Twenty-eight percent of the students received red dots, 26 percent received blue dots, and 14 percent received yellow dots. This information provided the catalyst for this school to re-design itself so that every child would be known.

The poet, Marge Piercy's *The Low Road* has an empowering message for all who accept the challenge of creating exceptional schools that value a one-person-at-a-time philosophy—in spite of the obstacles that are always present:

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We

and know who you mean, and
each day you mean more.

Lincoln School, a K-6 school in Mount Vernon, New York, decided to become a very good place for everyone and create a generative culture for teaching and learning. Lincoln's nearly 800 students come from every social class; they are 60 percent Black and Hispanic, 38 percent White, and 2 percent Asian. Lincoln students significantly out-perform peer schools with similar demographics. In fact, Lincoln students out-perform most schools regardless of peer-group classification. (*Please see the Reader's Comment from Lincoln's principal on page 52 -Ed.*)

David Whyte, the poet, writes about the meaning of "coming to ground" during difficult times. When an event or circumstances change the very foundation of life as we know it, it is a time of coming to ground. Whyte maintains that it is the very challenges of our lives that are the forces that shape us.

Lincoln School acts upon what it knows. It has come to ground with an identity that affirms the teacher as the single most important element in the achievement of its students. This school spends what others might consider an inordinate amount of time creating a generative teaching culture that insists upon stellar teaching in every classroom. Lincoln teachers receive relevant professional development—capacity-building opportunities that connect directly to ongoing instructional quality. Teachers are held in such high regard in Mount Vernon that the community is constantly celebrating the gifts teachers bring to the city. There are no teacher transfers from this school; instead, there is a waiting list for teachers who want to join the faculty community.

Tests or the fear of tests do not rule Lincoln School. The school actually de-emphasizes tests by insisting that all tests—although important—form only part of

the overall picture of a student. Accordingly, the school's focus is teaching to the whole child. Lincoln devotes an equal amount of time and support to the physical, emotional, and intellectual development of the student body. Art and drama are considered as important as language arts, mathematics, and science.

Lincoln School is no accident. The school is a result of what can happen when individuals dare to act upon their deepest convictions. Deeply dedicated individuals have had the strength and courage to confront criticism, active push-back from critics, and the inevitable resistance from intractable policies and institutions. The faculty persisted and the results eventually won over the critics. Also, through such actions, the teachers at Lincoln School found their true community, and in a profound sense, reclaimed their sense of belonging to a profession worthy of their best efforts.

There are other outstanding schools that model exceptionally strong instructional environments that work with the whole student. The MET School in Rhode Island is a small high school that is similar to Lincoln School. Oregon's own Rigler Elementary School in Portland is another example, as is Beaverton's Southridge High School.

►There is no fear in these schools!

Fear, Injustice, Action

►A common thread of these innovative and effective schools is the noticeable lack of fear. Teachers and students are not overly stressed-out about external measures or meeting some latest idea on how to improve schools with little-to-no money. These schools know how to stand in the gap between the often unfriendly political environment and a welcom-

ing school environment. There is no fear in these schools! No one in these schools would make a comment like the one I recently heard from an Oregon High School teacher, "Why do they (the public) hate us when we are so good?"

This teacher expressed powerful feelings based on injustice. Henry Nouwen, the philosopher and writer, wrote that a righteous response to injustice is to mourn, "...to cry for all those who lack care or hope". Today in Oregon, we are called to mourn—mourn so that Oregon's teachers do not accept the deprivation of Oregon's children and future as normal.

To properly mourn is to see injustice, indifference, lack of caring, political manipulation, and the hardness of heart for what they really are: a living darkness. We must mourn what might have been; we must mourn the profession's isolation and marginalization in our state, and we must mourn whatever role we have played in our own culpability.

One of our most gifted living American treasures is Maya Angelou. Her poetry and writings are widely acknowledged and honored. Maya is no stranger to coming-to-ground experiences. When she was seven years old, she was raped by a neighbor. She told her grandmother and the neighbor was apprehended and sent to prison. In prison, her attacker was also assaulted and killed. Her seven-year-old mind and heart, already in a state of shock and trauma, could not comprehend the savagery of some of the adults in her world. She blamed herself, as traumatized children often do, for his death, and for ten years was unable to speak. Maya was placed in special schools, seen as psychologically impaired, retarded, and abnormal.

To read or to listen to Maya Angelou today, it seems impossible that she could survive such a childhood. She writes that her pain was so deep, so nearly inaccessible, that it was the love of her family, two teachers, and close friends of the

family that finally got through to her well-defended isolation. Maya talks of gentle and respectful invitations, coupled with family resiliency that brought her back to the surface.

Many of Oregon's children arrive at school with much to overcome. Like Maya so long ago, these students need to be known, cared for, nurtured and taught in loving communities by compassionate and competent adults.

►There are no circumstances dire enough for our profession or State to warrant any compromise to the success of all of Oregon's children.

►Now is the time for Oregon's teachers to learn by Maya's example. We can mourn and accept disappointment but we cannot go forward without hope. We must surface with a unified purpose and voice. We must insist that every student, regardless of social class or ethnicity, receive the best education with a great teacher in every classroom. And we as a profession must create within ourselves a new state of allowing. We know what the essence of outstanding teaching is all about. We now have to challenge ourselves—to allow ourselves to travel beyond the classroom boundary, to enter into deeper conversations with the public we serve. We must lead in innovation and creativity, develop new ideas on K-20 governance, create community friendly models of education such as the Oregon Small School Initiative and Early College. There

are no circumstances dire enough for our profession or State to warrant any compromise to the success of all of Oregon's children. Indifference is not an option.

T.H. White, author of *The Once and Future King*, wrote some wonderful lines for Merlyn, King Arthur's personal prophet, magician, and counselor:

...you may see the world around you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.

There are reasons Oregon's world "wags" as it does. Merlyn's counsel for Arthur was that learning how the world works is important. Understanding can empower and fortify us. Movements begin when individuals decide to lead undivided lives. Oregon teachers are at the crossroad for a new direction. Educators in Oregon know how to create schools that assure a life-giving education in schools that are not ruled by fears of outside manipulation. We must now come out of isolation and into community.

One of my heroes is Vaclav Havel, the playwright, dissident, and statesman. His voice was one of informed, courageous, and passionate action. His poem, *It Is I Who Must Begin* could have been written for Oregon's public school teachers at the crossroad:

It is I who must begin...
whether all is really lost
or not depends entirely on
whether or not I am lost.



Jay Casbon is the CEO and Provost of OSU-Cascades, Oregon's first branch campus, located in Bend, Oregon. The campus, designed as a better-faster-less expensive alternative to more costly models of higher education, is beginning its fourth year and has the state's most vigorous enrollment growth (17 percent). Dr. Casbon is also a Professor of Education and a speaker and writer on issues pertaining to K-20 education. He is a contributor to *Teaching with Fire*, Jossey-Bass, 2003, and co-author of *Living the Questions*, a book on leadership to be released in 2005. Jay is currently involved in a writing project concerning new models for leadership in higher education.

Jay serves as Board Chair for the National Center of Teacher Formation and has served as an advisor for the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, a \$25-million program awarded to Oregon by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Meyer Trust. Dr. Casbon has also served as an advisor for Oregon's Chalkboard Project, a state-wide study for improving public schools in Oregon.