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WHY TEACHERS CAN'T TEACH

This column has repeatedly complained that today's children can't read, write, spell, add, subtract, and do other elementary basic skills as well as children of a generation ago. We've discussed the inadequacies of the schools and the textbooks. All this has inspired a letter from one of my readers who approaches the subject from the point of view of the teacher, and she makes some valid points in defense of the teacher.

"Did it ever occur to anyone why teachers can't teach?" she asks. "Let me inform you. Let's begin first with the child and his/her needs." For starters, she gives six principles.

"(1) There should never be over 20 children in a first grade classroom where we are laying the foundation and children need lots of individual help. (2) Their day should begin around 8 o'clock when they are alert -- not when the bus schedule says 8:45. (3) They should have had a decent breakfast.

"(4) They should not be up half the night watching HBO, CINEMAX, Showtime, etc. (I can't compete with sex and violence.) (5) They should not have to be moved into their fourth first grade in one year. (6) Parents should back teachers in their efforts for discipline."

"Another reason teachers can't teach," according to my correspondent, "is the frustration. I, for example, went to school and was trained to teach, not to be a glorified babysitter. Many parents want their children sent on to first grade against the recommendation of the kindergarten teacher because (are you ready?) mother works and they need a full day babysitter."

And that's not all, according to this teacher sounding off. "I also am frustrated by the fact that I am expected to be secretary, nurse, psychologist, and most importantly, policeman. Had I chosen one or all of these fields of endeavor, I would have no complaints. However, I chose to teach and must work teaching in among these other more pressing duties."

My correspondent cites "money" as another reason why teachers can't teach. "The school boards only have so much money and it must be divided among busing, maintenance, books, lights, heat, etc. Something must be eliminated due to lack of funds. So what happens? In order to keep schools open, teachers are reduced in numbers and class sizes are increased."

This frustrated teacher cites a couple of reasons "why teachers are leaving education and going into business. One, of course, is salary. The other, and most important, is that they are not allowed to do the job they chose to do. If business or industry will offer me a job to do what I do best, teach reading, I'm theirs."

This teacher says she is proud of the reputation she has for teaching first-graders to read. She adds, "My classroom is open to any and all visitors at any hour of the school day, and you will see phonics being taught." Of course, if she uses the phonics method, it's no wonder she is successful in teaching first-graders to read, and is happy to show off their skills to parents or other visitors at any time.

This teacher says that her students are able to read when the first grade year ends, "or they do not receive passing grades from me. However, this does not mean they will not enter second grade in the fall."

How can this be? She asks and answers her own question. When she fails a child, "the parents go over my head and the child is passed. This happens quite often, believe me. When such a child graduates and cannot read, I do not intend to be held accountable." I certainly don't blame her for feeling this way.

Teachers have been caught in the middle between undisciplined pupils, parents who are either angry at what their children are not learning or have abdicated their own role in education and supervision, and textbooks which are designed to change attitudes rather than cultivate basic skills. Most teachers want desperately to do a good job, and many have an uncommon dedication to their profession, but they feel hemmed in at every turn.

In Indianapolis last month, President Reagan told an educational conference that our nation's schools need "good old-fashioned discipline" rather than an increase in the $230 billion we spent on schools last year. Empathizing with the teachers, Reagan deplored the fact that some teachers "don't even have the authority to quiet down their class."

Teachers who really want to teach, and who have their hearts in the task, should be given the proper support by parents, school administrators, and textbooks.