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A Teacher's Leaven

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As I passed the teacher's classroom, the blond-haired first grader was standing in the hall again. Sometime everyday, it seemed, this youngster could be found standing with his nose pressing against a nonexistent spot just outside his classroom; and the school year had just barely begun. I cringed.

Public-school teachers teach children—not just the academically ready child or just the student whose parents can pay, but every child who meets enrollment criteria. That's the beauty of public education for America's children. Teachers are expected to produce results, too—even when the student may not be capable of keeping up with his classmates.

The student in the hall was one of the difficult ones. His parents would never attend a teacher-parent conference for the purpose of getting guidance for the child; thus, a free public education was the only hope for the boy to be able to discover at a young age the joys of literacy.

Poor social skills, poor academic skills, and poor developmental readiness characterized this difficult first grader. His parents were functionally illiterate and had moved to the Anadarko Basin, lured by the big money that could be made from the deep, rich gas fields beneath the Western Oklahoma location. During the Boom, there were times that we could spot five to ten working rigs in any direction almost any place we stood in Caddo County.

As I stopped to talk with the youngster, the teacher stepped outside the door and pulled me aside.

"He's terrible today," the teacher whispered. "His clothes are slept in, his hair is uncombed, and he's emotionally not ready for class this morning. He's had my class in turmoil ever since he walked through the door. Will you take him to the bathroom and spruce him up a bit and see if you can settle him down?"

With twenty-four other six-years-olds, her class was cramped to overflowing caused by the natural gas bonanza.
BASTIONS

"I've decided to really think about that boy tonight and find something good about him. If I can't find something good about him soon, we won't make it through the rest of the year," the boy's mentor expressed.

I marveled as I watched the teacher ready her classroom for the next day. Elementary teachers play an integral part of every student's success but are often forgotten as the youngsters grow older and experience other teachers who seem to play a more significant role in their lives. I couldn't help but wonder what the morrow would bring.

The next morning, I found the teacher as she prepared the morning lunch count. "I'm ready for my difficult child this morning," the teacher smiled. "Last night I realized how cute this little boy is and how much I appreciate his obvious enthusiasm even though it's generally misdirected. We'll make it through the year," she said with determination.

I felt good--no better--as I left the room that day. Every school day, public education offers non-readers a chance to read, the downtrodden a chance to rise up, and the unaccepted a chance at acceptance. As I think back about that experience, I know that teacher isn't unique--not in America.

(DALE W. HILL of Washita is becoming one of our regular contributors. An Elementary Counselor for the Anadarko Schools, he earned a Bachelor's degree at OU and a Master's degree at Hays State University. For avocation, he has taught guitar at a vo tech school the past twelve years.)