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ESSAY

Rats, Anxiety, and Heartbreak: What It Means to Teach in Detroit Public Schools

DAVID JAGUSCH

The rats heard the footsteps approaching. Hurriedly, they took a few more bites of the molding bread they had found in the corner. One of them hadn't made it to the feast; he was caught in a glue trap and writhed about until he had contorted his body so much the blood couldn't help but flow from his mouth, forming a red pool outlining his twisted corpse. The footsteps were upon them. Quick! A few more bites. As the lock disengaged, they scattered. Down through the vents, their nails clicking along the rusted tubes, echoing their retreat. For a moment time stood suspended. The darkness and cold mixed together, thickening the air, making it impossible to breathe. Brown water dripped from no fewer than four separate locations, the pipes in the ceiling cracking with age. Creeping from the warped floorboards, from beneath cabinets, and along the walls, window seams, and ceiling tiles, black mold flourished, giving the appearance that Rorschach himself had set up shop, splattering and spraying his psychological ink across the room.

The footsteps finally stepped through the door, a door that, like the floorboards, was weathered and warped. It needed to be forced open with a solid shoulder once unlocked. A light-switch was flicked on and a loud buzzing immediately began its taunting. Half of the lights came on fully, a quarter remained flickering at an epilepsy-inducing frequency, and the remaining bulbs simply surrendered in defeat. The dim yellow that did shine revealed the catastrophic scene for what it was, in all its stagnation and portentousness. A mass of white slippery fungi sprouted horizontally from the cracks along the south wall; dirt and leaves from the windows that wouldn't shut were strewn across the floor. Under the leaves, and no longer secured to the foundation, planks curled towards the ceiling, many stained with rat droppings and urine.

Standing in the doorway, she couldn't help but shiver as she drew in the sight before her, her breath hanging in the air before her face as she exhaled. Her nose twitched as she quickly pulled out her handkerchief and sneezed. After

nearly ten years of coming to this room, the smell of mildew and stagnation was not something she acclimated to, but something that only grew worse with time. It was significantly worse than the room in which she had spent her previous ten years. She placed her gloves, scarf, and bag into plastic bins; this way, the bedbugs that skittered and crept throughout the building would be less likely to hitch a ride back with her and set up camp in her or her children's beds.

Her coat stayed on due to the freezing temperatures, no amount of movement able to keep her warm enough without it. Grabbing the withered broom from the closet, she set to sweeping—the leaves, the dust, the dirt, the excreta all found their way from the floor and into a bin by the door. Well, most of it; the callouses on her hands darkened as each morning passed, her fingernails capturing some of the filth. Coming to the rat, she used the broom as a makeshift shovel to lift the lifeless body, glue trap still attached, and dropped him into the bin. She removed the traces of still-wet blood before continuing to sweep. Once finished, she began stuffing balled-up pieces of paper and chunks of cardboard into the gaps in the windowpanes. That day, it was supposed to snow.

Emptying the rain buckets and containers strategically placed about the room, she got onto her hands and knees, wiping up the water that overflowed overnight, doing what she could to remove any of the mold, trying her best to simply not smear it deeper into the crevices of the floor, making sure to hold her breath the entire time, her chest aching from the strain. With a sharp piece of floorboard that had broken off months ago, she scraped as many of the mushrooms off of the wall as she could, letting them softly fall into the wastebasket. Next, she removed her shoes so that she could remain balanced as she stood upon a table. Three out of its four legs were shakier than her own, but still she climbed. She did her best to adjust the ceiling tiles, to wrap pieces of cloth and tape around the leaking pipes. With a bucket and rag she wiped down the chairs, shelves, and desks. She prepped her

supplies for the day that hadn't even started yet. Hadn't even started, and yet her back ached, her muscles were tight and burning, her head throbbed. She smacked the dust from her knees; she straightened and smoothed her blouse and ran a comb through her hair. What she wanted more than anything at that exact moment was to sit, close her eyes, and rest—the few hours of sleep she had the night before just weren't going to cut it. But no matter, she had to make it work.

The bell rang, its three chimes marking the official beginning to the day, her hour and a half of work beforehand not being sanctioned as “official.” Small droplets of water began forming at the corners of her eyes. It wasn't the dust or the frigidness of the air that caused her eyes to water. They were tears. Wiping them away, she took a step into the hall and welcomed her class inside. The school day had started.

While this vignette may seem drawn from a post-apocalyptic novel set in the aftermath of a war or natural disaster, it's not. What I have described is a typical classroom in many Detroit Public Schools (DPS), a school district rank with destitution and conflict. Teachers in DPS are not at war in the traditional sense, but struggle and strife are ever-present in the buildings where they teach. The war-time disrepair of these buildings, in fact, is breeding ineffectiveness among DPS teachers. The physical condition of Detroit schools is not only harmful to student learning; the deteriorated environment also hinders the district's instructional staff, often-times rendering their actions useless.

In addition to the physical environment, there are two more factors that combine to create this environment of ineffectiveness. One is the mental environment. The mentality of a DPS educator is no longer that of the wholesome teacher stereotype, a sunshine-and-rainbows positivity that constantly beams in the eyes of students, eager to meet the day ahead of them. If that positivity does exist, it is merely becoming a façade to mask the brooding instability and pan-demonium that rattles about the teacher's mind.

A final factor is the emotional environment. DPS teachers are berated from all sides—from politicians, from general members of society, from administration, from parents—and when this happens, they end up lashing out at their students in both direct and indirect ways, for the simple reason that they are the ones with whom the teacher spends the majority of her or his time. Ineffectiveness is born, and teachers are the ones being blamed for the failing state of education in Detroit. The response from the “powers that be,” those who control school districts politically and monetarily, is that

teachers need to be “fixed,” when teachers are actually one of the only facets of public education that is currently functioning efficiently. This detrimental mindset of teacher-correction is ultimately having a ripple effect upon classroom effectiveness, leading to teacher burnout and withdrawal from the profession as a whole.

As a teacher and instructional coach in DPS, I know how physical, mental, and emotional atmospheres play into teacher effectiveness. For too long, teachers like me have been accused of being the root of failure in the contemporary American educational system. Arguing the opposite, this article will examine how Detroit Public Schools teachers—and teachers in similarly impoverished settings across the country—are in fact being denied the ability to perform their duties to the highest level. Instead, they are being set up for failure by a system that is too cash-strapped to repair its own infrastructure. Put simply, when the district fails to maintain healthy learning and instructional environments for teachers and students alike, the resulting mental and emotional stress cancels out teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Physical Environment

As illustrated by the opening narrative, the physical environment of a school or classroom can produce detrimental effects upon overall teacher effectiveness. For my purposes, physical environment refers to the concrete surroundings and conditions of the classroom and school building. While manipulations to the physical environment of a school setting can result in positive outcomes as well as negative outcomes correlated with teacher effectiveness, Detroit Public Schools is guilty of gross negligence in this regard, resulting in the literal deterioration of the foundations on which a school system is built.

The physical conditions of DPS are damaging the health of teachers and students. Black mold has been found in several Detroit schools. The presence of black mold results in detrimental health conditions, many associated with respiratory responses. Such symptoms include: chronic coughing and sneezing; eye, nose, and throat irritation; rashes; fatigue; and headaches. Besides the mold, there's the fungus. While it is unknown what types of mushrooms have been found growing out of walls in particular DPS classrooms (to my knowledge, the fungus found has never been tested), the potential injurious effects of ingesting wild-growing mushrooms in damp, unsanitary conditions cannot be ignored. It

is not a stretch of the imagination to see an elementary-aged child, for elementary schools are where some of these mushrooms were found, unknowingly plucking them from the wall and taking a bite. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that from an aesthetic standpoint, this fungus isn't really all that different than the food DPS students are served every day by the privatized food company that the district uses to save money.

Coming into contact with the feces and urine of mice and rats is all too common. In drawers, cabinets, vents, floors, and walls—our classrooms and hallways are rat bathrooms. In schools that depend on traps to control the rodent infestation, bacteria runs rampant. A daily ritual for many teachers is to check the traps in the morning for fresh catches. Unfortunately, rodents are often trapped over a weekend or school break. Imagine, a building with no air conditioning where room temperatures can reach the high nineties. A rat becomes caught and dies in a trap. For seven days, the body lies at rest. As the temperature increases, the gases and bodily fluids begin to expand; small little bursts sputter and pop from the mouth and anus. Blood and excrement ooze. Other rodents slowly approach, tiptoeing towards the stench. They know there's danger, but the instinct of hunger has kicked in. Nibbling bits of rotting flesh, two more rats then fall into the sticky mess, joining the mass of decomposition. Monday morning, the teacher arrives. Flies litter the corpses. But don't worry; the teacher spent part of her paycheck on rubber gloves, a mask, and cleaning supplies to disinfect her classroom with.

Mice and rats are not the only living creatures playing a role in the physical ecosystem that is a DPS classroom. Bedbugs are a common occurrence in schools across the district. These pests are often brought into the schools by hitching a ride with one of the students. This is a situation heartbreakingly depressing in its own right, revealing the living conditions of many DPS students and families. Besides crawling through students' hair, through their clothes, and

out of their backpacks, bedbugs have been found in classroom carpeting, in the bindings of textbooks, tucked away in the holes of notebooks, and in every type of nook and cranny imaginable. While bedbugs are not known to carry any disease, they are extremely invasive and parasitic, feeding on human blood and resulting in itchy, red bites. These bugs latch onto clothing or anything cloth such as a backpack. Often, they find the darkest, coolest location within proximity, leading to the possibility that while brought into the school by one student, the bedbug or its offspring will hitch a ride home with another student or staff member. DPS more often than not decides not to exterminate bedbugs if they are discovered within one of their school buildings.

If they pay to bring in exterminators, the district argues, students will simply bring the bedbugs back into the buildings (by no fault of their own), and sooner or later, the building will be infested yet again. And so the detrimental effects of poverty continue.

When bedbugs were found in our building, we were presented with a two-hour PowerPoint presentation about how to protect ourselves from the invaders. I don't claim to be an expert at exterminating bedbugs, but that PowerPoint successfully killed off any sense of comfort teachers and students should be able to feel while at school.

Ron Brown Elementary School (DTF image)

Malfunctions with heating and cooling systems from building to building throughout DPS are also all too prevalent. During the winter months, which in Michigan can last six months or more out of the year, teachers and students can be subjected to classrooms that are 45 degrees or lower. That students can see their own breath, and that many teachers keep personal thermometers on hand both attest to this fact. Staff and students are forced to wear their winter clothes in the classroom as they shiver, wipe their noses, and cough, all the while trying to write, or read, or think. It becomes so cold that whiteboard markers no longer write, and if they do, the ink literally freezes to the board.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are days when staff room temperatures to be 100 degrees or higher. This results in students losing focus, showing symptoms of heat exhaustion, sweating, and oftentimes becoming disoriented and disengaged. And when a majority of the schools enforce the strictest of uniform and dress-code policies, students are not allowed to wear shorts or t-shirts, their collared shirts and dress slacks trapping the heat and moisture to their bodies. This in turn leads to the embarrassment of many students as they cannot afford deodorant and do not have the ability to wash their uniforms everyday after school, resulting in unsanitary hygienic conditions. Many of us keep a stash of deodorant and body spray in our desks to protect our students' health and save them from social stigma.

Finally, there are the general building hazards that teachers and students must deal with, often due to neglect or lack of maintenance. Some teachers have severely sprained and even broken ankles and feet falling through holes that open up in the floor, putting them out of work for up to multiple weeks and otherwise severely restricting their mobility, a necessity of effective teaching. Ceiling tiles are constantly crumbling and falling with the potential of seriously hurting any individual below. Pipes leak in the hallways, the stairwells, the cafeterias, and, of course, the classrooms; pipes in the ceilings, pipes in the walls, pipes under sinks, and pipes along the floor. Perhaps the money spent on the yellow caution slip-and-fall signs that get set up near leaks would have been better spent fixing some of the leaks.

Bathrooms become unusable, backed up with waste due to failure with the plumbing. Broken windows make the malfunctioning heating and cooling systems almost irrelevant, as snow and rain blow through cracks and gaps during the winter and stifling humidity pours in during the summer. Tiles are missing, electrical outlets spark when any type of device is inserted, desks fall apart when sat in, paint is peeling, and rust covers and crumbles throughout the buildings. Schools literally become obstacle courses—one false move results in injury with no guarantees of worker's compensation. Besides sprains and broken bones, teachers have been cut and bruised, have tripped, fallen, slipped, and suffered many other injuries. If all of these things happen to the teachers, it is logical to assume that similar accidents are occurring with students, who may not be as aware of such hazards, especially at the elementary level.

With conditions such as these present in a vast number of Detroit schools, it is offensive for anyone—especially

politicians who control the financial fate and therefore the actual futures of thousands upon thousands of children—to entertain the thought that teacher effectiveness is dwindling due to conscious choices made by teachers themselves. Clearly, all such physical environmental factors are in no way the result of the teachers. Teachers are simply dealing with the fallout, left holding the bag of a failing public education system. The system is leeching money to bankers and emergency managers, while teachers struggle desperately to salvage the educations and futures of their students.

Mental Environment

The mental environment entails the variables that affect the cognitive faculties of a teacher. These variables play a role in an instructor's mental calculations, decision-making, problem solving, and critical thinking. One of the most prevalent factors currently weighing on the minds of DPS teachers is the implementation of the Marzano learning strategies in conjunction with Learning Sciences International (LSI) educational group. It is not that the teachers of DPS disagree with the learning strategies and methodology of Marzano and LSI; we do believe that many of the strategies they promote are in fact best practices as proven by the research that has gone into studying their effectiveness.

Our quarrel, however, is with how DPS has decided to implement this program in our district. From two to four times per month, LSI teacher and principal "coaches" enter our buildings for training and observations. We are told that these observations are "non-evaluative"—that is, they have no bearing on determining if we are "effective" teachers and if we get to keep our jobs. Yet, after a mere 1-2 hour training workshop consisting of a PowerPoint presented by one of the LSI coaches, instructors are expected to know the concepts and implement them in their classrooms. In fact, they are observed by up to six individuals at the same time. No matter what your job is, a group that large walking into your working environment on a near biweekly basis is enough to put mental strain on even the most effective of individuals, regardless of being told it is non-evaluative.

This notion of being "non-evaluative" rings false for DPS teachers for multiple reasons: instructors have been told that these LSI observations will become the new standard for evaluations at the beginning of next school year; also, with each evaluation, observers take intricate notes, and concluding each round of evaluations, principals are then given

“points.” If teachers and a building do not show growth from observation to observation, points are deducted and a school is “penalized.” Regardless of whether this is the district simply practicing the upcoming LSI evaluation system, it is impossible to ignore that, to teachers, these observations are not simply “non-evaluative,” and they are, consequently, mentally taxing.

Another factor that influences the mental well-being of DPS teachers is the ongoing closures of our schools. Each year, the district closes more schools. Principals recognize this fact and, understandably, toe the line when it comes to district policy. Administrators are holding teachers’ feet to the flames in regards to the requirements set forth by LSI, requirements that were set forth by the district. No matter how often the LSI teacher and principal coaches try to pacify the instructional staff by telling them that their observations are not evaluative, teachers do not trust them, because in the end, it is not LSI who has the final say over what is evaluative and what is not. It is the district—more specifically, the emergency manager, his appointees, and those appointed to control the district by Governor Snyder and the state legislature.

From a psychological perspective, it would be ignorant to assume that the administrators—including principals and vice principals—who are a part of these walk-through observations, will not subconsciously carry over what LSI is training them in (i.e., how to perform evaluative observations for the new school year) to the actual district evaluations they perform. This exposure results in observing what the district deems as “best practices”—those programs the district has spent money on—not what constitutes best practices in the actual learning environment of a DPS classroom.

The mere quantity of observations causes teachers mental anguish: two to four LSI observations a month in tandem with quarterly to bi-quarterly informal observations by a building administrator as well as a formal observation per semester. These do nothing more than result in increased levels of anxiety and stress. No matter if a teacher is in her first year teaching in DPS, or if she is the most experienced of master teachers, I have personally witnessed educators become physically ill at the thought of yet another observation, vomiting and suffering panic attacks before these “non-evaluative” observations ensue.

Other teachers are simply so drained and uninterested in regards to these observations that they have become apathetic, which, sadly, carries over into their general classroom duties. DPS-mandated LSI walk-throughs are taking

the spark out of teachers’ hearts, and students are the ones suffering the consequences. The process of implementing these LSI strategies is completely backwards. Again, taking into consideration that the majority of teachers are willing to admit that these are research-proven best practices, a better operational procedure would be to reverse the current paradigm that DPS is implementing. Currently, teachers receive about 10% worth of “training” from the LSI coaches, and then the other 90% of the time is spent being observed by the coaches, administrators, instructional specialists, members from the district literacy department, and members of the central office. If the district truly did care about implementing an instructional methodology for teachers to buy into, they would provide teachers with 90% training in a positive and supportive learning environment where they did not fear the consequences of a negative observation, and then only 10% of the time would be spent observing how teachers are doing in regards to trying out new strategies in their classrooms. The entire language of this process needs to change because all that is happening right now is a systemic breeding of fear, anxiety, and apathy among DPS teachers.

The monetary motive behind LSI implementation is enough to cause mental stress in and of itself. The millions of dollars in grant money spent by DPS to hire LSI could have been appropriated for other means necessary to the district’s success. Maybe most importantly, these millions could have been used to fill teacher vacancies across DPS—this year alone, there are over 170 teacher vacancies from the elementary up to the high schools. And the ones facing the brunt of this burden, other than the students themselves, are the teachers. Because of this astounding number of vacancies, class sizes have ballooned in number, with some approaching 60 students per class. If DPS is so concerned about implementing LSI because the strategies they provide are supported by research, they should also recognize the research proving that class sizes beyond 25 hinder student growth and teacher effectiveness.

The mental stress is further exacerbated when teachers must give up their preparation time to sub in unstaffed classes. This time could be used to grade papers, plan effective lessons, or take part in professional learning communities to enhance the overall learning environment of the school as a whole. Teachers then become overly taxed, as they must bring ever-increasing amounts of work home with them. When money is being spent to train already certified teachers, many of whom have advanced degrees and multiple

certifications, and when there are much greater financial needs that must be met, the district sends the message that teachers are to blame for student failure or underperformance. Most teachers resent being retrained in strategies that they learned as undergrads or in graduate programs they took for continuing education credits.

This devaluing of instructional staff can also be seen in the policy initiatives that are already in place, such as the presence of Teach for America (TFA). Placing uncertified individuals into vacant positions will not solve the teacher shortage in the district. Again, the message being sent loud and clear to teachers of Detroit and other similar urban school districts where TFA is present is that their role is not valued and that anyone can perform their duties. The argument by the district is that a body in the classroom is better than no body at all. But no one would undergo a surgery performed by an individual who held a degree in an unrelated field and lacked formal medical training. Some say that this compari-

people would say. And teaching in Detroit doesn't?

Whether explicitly stated or not, the mental capacities of teachers are continuously under attack when they see individuals who have little to no educational knowledge or training placed in positions that actual teachers work hard to earn and maintain—four to five years to earn an undergraduate degree and teaching certificate, plus a requirement to reenroll in graduate courses in order to maintain certificate credentials, plus hundreds of required hours of professional development. In many cases, these measures are funded by teachers themselves, teachers who have families and bills. Now individuals with a fraction of the training are being begged to come fill vacancies.

The mental strain of working within a district that systematically devalues the profession is only worsened by the fractured teachers union in Detroit. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is just as unstable as the district itself. With constant disagreements about what direction the union

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son is too drastic to use, that teachers cannot be compared to doctors, so a smaller-scale example that society deems less "meaningful" might fit: would you want the person making your chai latte that you get every morning before work to have no training whatsoever? Sure, there's a chance that some people might get it right the first time around with little to no experience, but there will be a large number of individuals who mess up your drink at least a few times before getting your caffeinated morning bliss correct. This doesn't seem like that big of a deal, but how would you feel if it was your child that got "messed up" on the first try?

Michigan legislators, in collaboration with Governor Snyder, desire to place non-certified individuals, other than those from TFA, into DPS classrooms in order to deal with the high number of vacancies. There are cities with a shortage of firefighters, but the state would never consider putting uncertified individuals into that role; there are cities with a shortage of police officers, but the state would never consider putting uncertified individuals into that role either. Well, these jobs require individuals to risk their lives, some

should take, the DFT is more divided than it has ever been. Many teachers are still taking sides over the now-ousted union president and the executive board that remains in place due to the forcible takeover and trusteeship of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT.) Members have lost their voting rights and are frustrated because of the lack of communication between the executive board and DFT members, the lack of visible action, and the general lack of respect. DFT members feel as if they are being pacified, because in reality they are paying union dues in order to be a part of a democratic entity while not actually being allowed to take part in any sort of democratic process. These days, it is a rarity for a DFT general membership meeting to actually run until completion. Shouting matches ensue, there's heckling and booing and cussing, the sergeant-at-arms is called into action, and members shove and strike each other.

This is the antithesis of unity. The division and squabbling are direct results of teachers being desperate for an outlet. They have voices that need to be heard, and they refuse to sit in silence any longer. But when those who control

their fate refuse to listen, a mental breakdown ensues. It is the result of a trickle-down effect spurred by the actions of the district. Teachers are taking their frustrations out on each other instead of the district itself. Many believe that this was the district's motive all along—self-destruction from the inside out.

Emotional Environment

By emotional environment, I mean those factors that influence the way teachers feel about themselves and how they interact with their students. DPS teachers are under a constant barrage of emotional fluctuation. A literal case of manic depressive behavior, we teachers of DPS experience the highest of highs, as when our students overcome the most impossible of odds, as well as the lowest of lows, as when our students fall to the demon of poverty, fail our classes, or die. This description is not meant to undermine or undercut the emotional experiences of teachers in any type of setting—no matter the district, all teachers experience these highs and lows. All teachers are emotional warriors, but DPS teachers face a daily torrent of emotionally arduous situations. Undoubtedly, such emotional strain negatively impacts teacher effectiveness. It is enough to be expected to perform at the highest level of effectiveness when facing hazardous working conditions and mental stress, but to be expected to achieve perfection in the face of heartbreak, well, that's something that even the most experienced and masterful of educators struggle with. It's the heartbreak that starts to drag us down, that makes us cry the entire car ride home, that makes us cry to our spouses and friends and family members. Heartbreak is the reason why we cry ourselves to sleep at night, sometimes stopping us from sleeping at all. If only others truly understood what we go through.

As Detroit teachers, we engage daily with students who break our hearts. Children who haven't eaten sit in desks before us. Their heads slump down not as a sign of disrespect, but for lack of bodily energy. Their hands shake and their concentration is intermittent. Their stomachs growl and quake. Putting their heads down and curling their bodies into a hunched semicircle isn't only a coping mechanism to deal with the physical pain, but it also serves to hide the embarrassment, embarrassment from the sounds their hunger makes as it echoes from under their desks, so loud it causes others to look up from their work. Putting their heads down hides the tears that hunger brings. We see their malnutrition; we see their fatigue, their weakness, the vacant

expression that comes over their eyes that loll from side to side unable to focus.

They come in wearing clothes that are two sizes too small or two sizes too large, full of holes and rips, soiled and fetid. Being required to wear a uniform or adhere to a strictly enforced dress code is detrimental to these children of poverty because their families cannot afford to provide them with a fresh change of clothes for each day of the week. If an extra trip to the laundromat does not fit that week's budget, they are forced to re-wear dirty, unhygienic clothing. The other alternative in most cases is suspension for violating the uniform policy.

Lice and bedbugs are a given as we see the red bumps and rashes blemishing the young skin of our students, turning into open wounds as they continuously scratch and pick in hopes of gaining just a second of relief. We also have students who are covered with so many cuts it's as if their bare skin was dragged along asphalt for miles on end. Self-inflicting, they cut their legs and arms and abdomens; slice after slice after slice after slice, so many that it's impossible to tell where one cut ends and another begins; so many cuts that it's impossible for them to heal, a constant red ooze seeping from the half-formed scabs. When we see this, we try not to stare, but sometimes it's hard because we understand the pain they are going through. After all, that's why many of us joined this profession in the first place: to help ease this pain. They need relief from the world in which they live, but the environment of DPS is doing nothing to support them. It's a situation left up to the teachers to try and salvage, attempting to bring new hope to those who have succumbed to the hopelessness of poverty.

We see students lie because they know they're trapped, trapped by the world in which they were born. They lie about college prospects, about playing ball for a school that has never even seen them play, about what they want to do with their lives. They tell their friends they've gotten a full ride to this college or that one. In a way, they're not so much lying as they are dreaming. They say these things because they feel as if they can never afford to move beyond the streets where they grew up.

We see some students give up and some students fight. We see students get robbed and raped and hospitalized. We see them on the news. We see them achieve greatness when all odds are against them. We see the triumph of will. We see students become parents. We see dropouts and graduations and comeback stories and failures and successes. We

see students come to school once every two weeks because they pull third shift at the plant in order to help their parents pay the bills and put food on the table for their little brothers and sisters. We see children become adults at far too early an age, little ones caring for each other, little ones learning more from each other than we could ever teach them.

We see our students die. We go to funerals. We hold the friends and brothers and sisters and cousins of the deceased in our arms as they weep and tremble with grief, using our own shirts as handkerchiefs to absorb their pain as we cry with them.

We provide students with an endless stream of school supplies, and even though we might complain about having to give each student something to write with every single day, about constantly giving them paper and notebooks and erasers, we know that as much as they might brush it off, as much as they might act like they don't care about school and that they simply forgot to bring their materials, the truth is that they cannot afford the mere cost of a pencil, and that in itself is enough to make one cry. We pray with our students in times of crisis, whether we believe or not. We laugh together. We stay with them after hours to help with homework because there is no electricity, heat, or running water at home, things that many of us take for granted. We see students homeless, moving from shelter to shelter with their entire family, sharing cots and standing in line at kitchens for one meal a day or for clothing handouts.

We see our students go to war, war with the world, war with themselves, war with us. We give them shoes for their freezing winter feet and backpacks and jackets and food and money and shirts and deodorant and toothpaste and love and comfort and friendship and a shoulder to cry on and ears to listen and advice and sacrifice. It cannot be our fault when we are the ones who give everything we have and more, when we are the ones who work second jobs to support our love for these children, when we are the ones who give up all of our time and energy and health and well-being for the sake of our students. We have given everything, yet we get treated as if we are nothing.

The Future of Detroit

While I hope that my depiction of DPS raises many issues, perhaps the two most important questions are as follows: How are teachers remaining, or at least attempting to remain, effective when faced with such environmental challenges? And if teacher effectiveness is a legitimate concern for a

district, what can be done to enhance teacher effectiveness in a more positive and successful manner?

From my experiences, those teachers who remain effective despite all the challenges of DPS are those who continually focus on one thing: their students and the overwhelming influence they hold over them. It seems like such a simple concept—of course we are here for the students. But the fact is, we as DPS teachers need this constant reminder. Today, as I conclude the writing of this article, the US Attorney has formally pressed charges against 13 past and current DPS administrators involved with corruption and taking kickbacks from certain school vendors. This will inevitably result in yet another onslaught of negative press for all employees of DPS, even those of us who had absolutely nothing to do with these crimes. So, yes, we need to remind ourselves why we do the job that we do, why we make the sacrifices, why we choose to struggle—it's because of our students. Those teachers weathering this storm are those who take solace in the positive relationships they form with their students. They recognize the hope and the potential that every single student, even the ones they struggle and butt heads with, has inside.

These are the teachers who every day—no matter how many LSI observations they must put up with, no matter how many pay-cuts, no matter how much bad press they receive—find at least one small moment of joy in every day of teaching. Again, this seems simple, but unfortunately we live in a society where finances often forcibly motivate even the most altruistic of individuals, and master teachers are forced to leave the district they love in order to tend to their own personal and familial obligations. This is a crime. When teachers who choose to teach in one of the neediest districts in the country have no other choice but to leave because they have nothing left to give, nothing left to sacrifice, then a change needs to be made, and it is not with the teachers. We need the constant reminder that we are performing a meaningful duty, that we are valued, that our students are valued, and that we are effective.

To improve our environment, we need a multifaceted approach. It begins when we stop blaming teachers. Trust teachers. We have the training; we know what to do. Sure, none of us are perfect, and sometimes we will need a refresher course on a particular strategy or best practice. But we are not the root of failure in failing districts. It has become a tired maxim in the teaching community, but I will say it again for argument's sake: you wouldn't blame a doctor for

a disease she or he is trying to cure, so don't blame teachers for a failing school district. We are simply attempting to battle a cancer—the cancer of poverty, the cancer of ignorance, the cancer of inequality, the cancer of politics. Teachers, as with any profession, need to feel as if they matter. The entire mental and emotional culture of public education needs to change to promote value and meaningful engagement among educators, but this will not happen by constantly reprimanding, insinuating, or introducing new punitive initiatives.

We have barely even begun this process. When teachers are self-medicating with alcohol and prescription drugs, when they have standing appointments with therapists in order to deal with the crushing weight of stress and anxiety, when they spend all morning throwing up in the staff bathroom, when they cannot afford to buy new clothes for their own biological children let alone supplies for their 150 children they see in their classrooms, when teachers themselves are dealing with the affliction of poverty, when they find more pain than joy in their life's work, then we have a problem. Blame the politicians, blame the emergency managers, blame the administrators who give in to monetary corruption, blame society, or blame the voters—but do not blame the teachers.

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