

Renewed energy is being pumped into K-12 classrooms

Joe Allen is excited about his future. The 1997 Grand Valley State University graduate from the School of Education believes he can make a difference and is looking forward to being a positive role model for his future students.

"To see how kids grow is exciting to me," Allen said. "I'm fairly open-minded and can bring myself to a child's point of view. I love to teach at their level and try to get them to act like themselves at school. We've got to be like parent, teacher and friend to them. Sometimes, we have to be like a big brother or big sister."

Sue Sieracki (1994) shares Allen's enthusiasm. Sieracki, 45, is in her third year as a fourth grade teacher at Godfrey Elementary in the Godfrey-Lee district. She previously worked as a dental assistant before embarking on her new career by earning her B.S. degree and certification from GVSU and the School of Education in 1994.



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- Sue Sieracki

"You come in with a whole lot of enthusiasm," Sieracki said. "Sometimes it's like a 24-hour job. You eat, sleep and breathe your classroom and the things you try to accomplish."

"Some students may be better off financially than others, but that doesn't mean they don't have problems too. There's a challenge to reach students no matter where you're teaching."

That excitement is fresh. The commitment is encouraging. Today's teachers are graduating from college and bringing a renewed idealism and passion into the profession. They believe that every student has potential and that they are carrying the torch for the future by passing their knowledge on to ensuing generations.

It's a good start, but the real challenge is trying to maintain that exuberance. That is perhaps the most difficult assignment confronting teachers today.

"There are some teachers who are teaching the exact same class the exact same way as they did 15 years ago," said Dr. Linda McCrea, GVSU's coordinator of elementary teachers. "For someone to stay fresh, you have to really like what you're doing and keep it exciting. It sometimes helps when student teachers bring in a different kind of excitement and a heightened level of energy into a classroom."

"That additional energy might just be what the veteran teachers need to bring a new enthusiasm and freshness back into their classrooms and teaching processes. Teachers need to learn as much from their students as their students learn from them."

After more than three decades of teaching at the same school, Roger Perkins has seen a good share of his contemporaries come and go. A member of Grand Valley's first four-year graduating class in 1967, Perkins has taught social studies and political science classes for 30 years at Kenowa Hills High School. He now teaches many of his former students' children and maintains his zeal for the profession, approaching every school year like a new adventure.

"It's hard to get burned out, because kids change and society changes," he says. "I teach in an area of social studies and political science that is always changing. There's always a new Congress or a new scandal to discuss."

Perkins' teaching methods include real-life enactments of court cases and providing students with hands-on involvement to teach and inform. That formula of interaction has worked well over the years for both students and teacher.

"You feed off the kids, and I've always had pretty good students," Perkins said. "Now, if I had to teach world history before 1800, that might be a different story..."

With up to 47 percent of teachers in Michigan eligible for early retirement this year, there are more positions becoming available than in the past 30 years. With the changing of the guard comes a slight change of some perceptions and teaching methods from the past, according to McCrea.

"The focus of teaching is much different than it was 30 years ago," McCrea said. "The opportunity to teach and interact at the same time is becoming more and more important. The teacher's role is sometimes to facilitate that interaction and empower kids to be in charge of their own learning to allow kids to learn."

"In today's work environment, it's a team effort and everyone works as



Roger Perkins

Creativity curbs feelings of complacency and burnout

teams and gets along. That's the way business is done today and that's what some of the focus in the classroom must be also to prepare them for the future.

"You need to be organized, you need to be prepared with lesson planning and always expect the unexpected."

Falling Into The Rut

Most teachers agree that maintaining that high level of enthusiasm is easy when everything is fresh. The inevitable challenges — from students, parents, administration and even those self-imposed — begin to chip away at that seemingly invincible armor they had on when they started the job.

"I like that idealism and enthusiasm they take with them going into the teaching profession," says Dr. John Zaugra, a senior counselor at GVSU. "It's a neat attribute to take with them and stays like that for a good period of time. Then reality sets in."

Frustration begins when goals are not attained. Multiple challenges — coming from as many directions as there are students — begin to compound matters. All of a sudden, tried-and-true teaching methods don't seem to be reaching the students.

"You sometimes struggle to keep that idealism, because you do run into a lot of obstacles," Sieracki said. "You can go about it and do it the easy way and not do any more than is required, or you can do it the way you've been trained."

"You've got to constantly fight against falling into the trap of taking the easier way of teaching or being complacent. You've got this idealism that you start with and it takes an awful lot of energy to keep it up."

It's not always easy.

"After a while, they sometimes feel like they can only do so much," Zaugra said. "There's only so much time. There's only so much research available and only so much personal time."

"When you're in a classroom with 30 students with 30 individual needs from motivation to working with at-risk kids or those with a drug problem or problems at home, it wears them out after a while."

The teacher begins to think that he or she is alone against the world. If that frustration is not checked, teachers can become disillusioned. It can lead to apathy or even burnout.

"Teachers have the most demanding jobs of all," Zaugra said. "What you're doing is molding and shaping the values and attitudes of students and providing them with the basic education for them to take to the following grades and later on in life."

"The frustration sets in when teachers realize that no matter how hard they work, that without parental support or administrative support — and if the students don't perform — then they begin to think their efforts aren't satisfactory."

Rising Above The Pitfalls

Zaugra suggests a "controlled-caring" concept as a way to avoid burnout and fatigue.

"You can be as idealistic as you want to be and demonstrate a lot of enthusiasm and extend yourself for your students, but at the same time you have to know and control what you can and cannot do," Zaugra said. "Do not let it carry over and affect your personal life. Extend yourself through caring and genuineness, but don't take it home with you. You have to separate yourself from your job at home, otherwise you stay up all night thinking about students and about supporting the learners in the classroom or what administrators are saying."

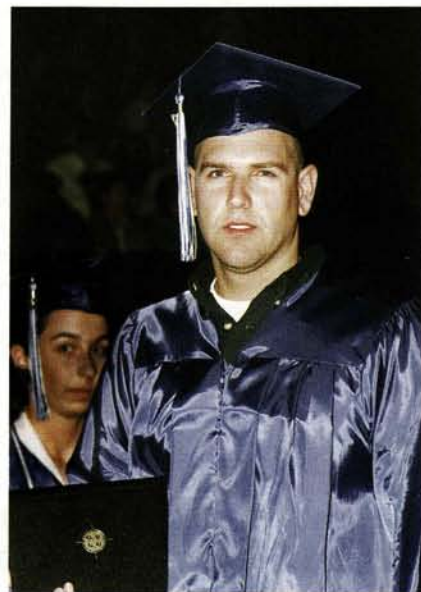
Sieracki said that setting short-term goals and going after smaller victories of accomplishment helps keep the frustration levels lower for both student and teacher alike.

"If you set the goals too high, children have a tendency to become apathetic much easier because they are more difficult to attain," she said. "You want to create an environment that is non-threatening."

Communication among peers in the field, whether attending seminars and workshops or conventions, is a solid way of attaining new information and/or ideas that — when implemented — could help keep a classroom setting exciting.

"You have to get involved with new ideas, because where there are new

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ideas and continuous learning and new technology, there's always energy," Zaugra said. "Teachers are enthusiastic in trying new things out and there is a lot lower burnout rate in districts where innovation is part of the learning process. Being active and being creative and using ideas and engaging in dialogue with peers is important. Otherwise people get bored with their work. If they get bored, they get depressed and lose interest in teaching. If that happens, they become ineffective."

Sometimes, even the craziest-sounding of ideas can make sense and keep teaching and learning fun.

"I try to do some off-the-wall things to keep their attention," Sieracki said. "I'll pretend I'm a molecule and bounce around the classroom and bump into things and move around faster to show what happens when molecules get hot, and then I'll slow down when I'm showing them what happens when molecules get cold."

Or what happens when she's out of breath.

"I'm constantly finding ways to make learning fun," Sieracki said. "Other teachers I work with try to keep it fun too, and we try to share that kind of enthusiasm with each other."

Becoming involved with other school-affiliated activities, such as sports, drama or debate helps curb the burnout factor as well.

Perkins, for example, has served as the only golf coach Kenowa Hills has ever had, producing numerous golf championships and several current head golf professionals, including former Michigan Open champion, Brent Veenstra. Perkins also served in a part-time capacity as the district's athletic director for several years.

"Coaching adds some spice to it," he says. "It's like a little extra incentive. I also coached a little football and officiated. I think getting involved in the extracurriculars helps strengthen the commitment."

The well-worn lament — "They just don't want to learn" — has been around as long as there have been classrooms. The bottom line is that as long as there are teachers willing to teach, there will always be students willing to learn. The stakes, however, keep getting higher with each ensuing generation.

"It's no worse now than ever before, but times have changed to make it more challenging for those who don't get a high school education or even a college education," Perkins said. "The students who do not want to learn will have a harder time in life than they had 20 or 30 years ago. No longer can their parents get them a job at Steelcase or General Motors. It's much more competitive out there and they need a basic education or higher just to compete."

"It's up to us as teachers to prepare them the best possible way we can."