

Kevin Hodgson: Raising up our voices

By Kevin Hodgson

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"Please do not blame those of us in public schools for how unprepared for higher education the students arriving at your institutions are. We have very little say in what is happening to public education. Even the most distinguished and honored among us have trouble getting our voices heard in the discussion about educational policy."



— **Kenneth Bernstein, “A Warning to College Profs from a High School Teacher,” from *Academe*, the journal of American Association of University Professors**

I went into a recent Northampton School Committee meeting in my role as a parent, concerned about school climate issues in the Leeds Elementary School where my youngest son is a second-grader. What I didn't expect that night was to be witness to the power of teacher activism in the face of impending budget cuts about to hit the city.

The steady stream of teachers from Jackson Street Elementary School who took to the podium during the public comment period that night was a strong reminder of the voice that classroom teachers still have, and must use, in the political sphere. Most of these educators spoke in nervous voices, trembling a bit in the spotlight that differs so much from their contained classroom. They were visibly upset about the austere measures they see coming that may lead to not just reductions in staffing, but more importantly, the curtailing of services for the most neediest population of our city — our children.

One instructional paraprofessional spoke of her one-on-one work with a young student who was pulling on her sleeve that morning, telling her that she “needed me” to come to music class. The student did not think she could be in control and focused, otherwise. The paraprofessional, however, was being assigned to another class during that time, to work with another student with their own set of needs. That left the first child distraught, and this educator argued that it will only get worse as staff gets cut to reduce the deficit, and everyone gets spread even thinner.

Another teacher spoke of class sizes, and the impact this issue has on learning when the number of students in an elementary classroom moves from the low 20s to the 30-student range. She noted that the ability to reach individual students, a hallmark of effective education, gets diminished as the number of bodies in the room increases. Still another teacher spoke passionately about the need for physical education and the arts in the lives of young children, and

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bemoaned how Northampton seems to have lost its allure as a home of the arts when it comes to its schools.

It occurred to me later that we teachers have for too long left the discussions and rhetoric around educational change to the politicians and, increasingly, the corporations and billionaires (Bill Gates, to cite just one example). Just glance at the news stories that have filtered out through the years across the country and in our state. There's no mistaking the negative undertones that seem to permeate the chatter about the state of education, and where it might be heading. Fingers point, almost always in the direction of teachers. And yet teachers seem reluctant to fight back. It may be that people who have chosen a career as educators do it for the same reason I became a teacher — to work to enrich the lives of young people, and to make a difference in the world, one person at a time.

Most teachers don't view their role in policy discussions as influential or important. They may see their work in the classroom as the sole way to institute change. They may not realize that they, too, have a voice and veritable army of supporters: parents. I know this in my role as father. I take cues from my sons' teachers, and if they are silent, I expect that things are fine. If they are outraged, I am outraged with them.

So, sitting there, in the Northampton School Committee meeting that night, I was both moved by the passion of those city teachers advocating in strong voices for their students and saddened that we don't always hear enough of their stories throughout the year — those little moments when a child suddenly learns how to read or the larger moments when a school takes on an issue like bullying and changes social dynamics.

I admire the work of our elected School Committee members, who give up hours of their time trying to keep this ship afloat only to be hamstrung by financial issues often outside of their control. They face tough decisions. Still, there is never a more important time for teachers to find the inner courage to become very public partners in shaping educational policy and make their voices heard above the noise. As a parent, I want to hear those stories of learning and passion that impact my children's lives. As a teacher, I want to join with fellow educators to make sure our stories don't get lost in the political sphere.

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