

From the Editor:

SOME THOUGHTS ON AMERICAN EDUCATION AND ON AMERICAN TEACHERS

Stephen Kneeshaw
College of the Ozarks

Editor of *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*

On Memorial Day 1998 the sheriff of Springfield, Oregon, lamented the killing of four people and the wounding of several others by a fifteen-year old student wielding a gun just days before. He expressed the grief that gripped the people of Springfield, the state of Oregon, and the United States. He closed by noting that in his many years in the military and in law enforcement, he had seen the best and the worst in people and in society. What saddened him now, he confessed, was that he was seeing much more of the worst than the best.

Springfield was only one of several American communities that witnessed violent killings of students and teachers by students in schools in 1997, 1998, and 1999. The list reads like a cross-country American geography lesson: Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Springfield, Oregon; Littleton, Colorado; Conyers, Georgia. These towns--all reflecting middle-American values--suffered the worst of the incidents. Parents, teachers, and students fell to bullets fired by students ranging from eleven years into their late teens. Other towns and cities experienced problems with violence (even shootings without deaths), but these were the ones that received the most national attention.

These horrific episodes marked the worst moments during a tough time for American education. Newspapers and television frequently reported on violent incidents in schools. Talk of gang violence in big cities sometimes spread to small towns. Reports of declining literacy levels and falling test scores added another area of concern, with American students often trailing badly in international rankings of student scores in mathematics and science. All of this came with finger-pointing, breast-beating, and lamentations about declining values in homes and diminishing civility in schools. (The latter was a growing topic of interest in colleges and universities as well as at lower academic levels.) And, sad to report, much of this promises to continue into the next century.

I cannot explain why there seems to be a continuing decline in American education, or at least a decline in the abilities of today's students compared to those we saw ten years ago in our classrooms or twenty years ago. Neither can I explain why troubled students seem to turn frequently to violence. Experts from all fields seem to disagree when they discuss these concerns. Some blame a breakdown of "traditional" American values, the disintegration of nuclear families, schools that have grown too large to identify or deal with troubled students, tensions between athletes and other

students, the easy availability of guns and explosives, violence in television, movies, and music, the impact of the Internet and World Wide Web, and the list goes on.

In what for me has become a troubling point, some people are quick to lay the blame on teachers. I cannot pinpoint the causes of problems in American education with any certainty--no one can do that. But I can say with a great deal of personal confidence that the fault does not lay with American teachers. Yes, some teachers have grown tired--a few because their years in education have worn them down and others because they often unjustly catch blame from parents, social critics, and politicians who feel a need to blame someone beyond themselves for society's ills. Teachers are overworked and underpaid, and they often are underappreciated. But they are not the problem in education. If anything, they will become the solution.

As a student, teacher, and administrator, I have been involved with American education in public and private institutions for more than forty years. Today I am a college teacher, but I spend a great deal of time in elementary and secondary classrooms as part of my work in history education. My wife is a second-grade teacher. Our three children have gone through public schools from pre-school through graduate work; our son taught for two years as a TA at the graduate level and our oldest daughter is an elementary teacher. Every day I live with education--at work and at home--at a variety of levels. Recently I brought much of this together in a semester-long sabbatical leave devoted to visiting, observing, and evaluating secondary classroom teachers in several states--from Missouri and Arkansas through the Southwest and along the Pacific coast. I wanted to gather together as many ideas about teaching history and the social studies as I could to enrich my own store of teaching methods and to share with my students who are preparing to become teachers.

Over six months I visited more than fifty schools--public schools, prep schools, private academies, military institutes, Native American schools--and observed more than 100 teachers, some only once, others on several occasions and some for extended observations over a week or more. What I saw was a remarkable mix of men and women who have devoted their lives and their life work to young people, because they know--they know, not just believe--that they can make a difference. What I saw was not a reflection of the ancient and wrongheaded adage that "Those who can do, and those who can't teach." No--this was "Those who can teach!" and they teach their students well. They teach history and government and English and more. But most of all they teach people, and they turn out young men and women who are better for the experience.

I could share many stories to illustrate, but I will settle for two examples. I spent several days in one of the largest public high schools in the state of Washington, on one day observing an experienced teacher who worked with "the lowest achieving juniors in the school" (description from the department chair), teaching three-hour blocks of American history, English, and "careers." During the first hour of the first block, two girls arrived after the tardy bell and almost immediately became mouthy

with their classmates and abusive to the teacher when he intervened. But he stayed the course, to use an old line, and talked them under control. He had acted calmly to defuse what could have become a more troubling confrontation. He took the next fifteen minutes of class to speak with all of the students about the need for respect--for both self-respect and respect for others. He reminded them all of his rules and expectations for the class. Then for the next two and a half hours the class stayed fairly well on task, analyzing *The Grapes of Wrath* as a way to understand the Great Depression. Because one teacher had treated his students with respect--setting a good example for them to follow--he was able to get "low achieving juniors" to engage a difficult novel and to make connections among history, literature, and work, good stuff for even the best students to manage.

I spent parts of several days over a two-month period in a Native American school, also in Washington state, observing different class sections of American history. For me, the most impressive class was what the teacher described as "a laboratory class." In fact, this class was a self-paced, independent study class in American history, with a dozen students ranging in age from fifteen to twenty. All of the students had dropped out of school--for time to work, to give birth, to deal with personal problems--but they had returned, and they returned with the intention of getting through high school. For each student the teacher had prepared individual plans for studying and then passing American history. "If I didn't do it this way," he told me, "they would get lost in the regular class and probably drop out again." These were not "special education" students, by the traditional definition of that term. But for this one teacher each one was "special" and deserving of (as well as needing) individual attention to succeed. Preparing the individual lesson plans for these students--twelve for this one class, besides keeping up with his other classes, demanded an incredible commitment of time and energy every day. But this teacher was determined to get these special students through high school and help them make a better place for themselves as adults.

These are just two "incidents," not the kind that would get attention from the media, but the kind that happen every day in schools across the United States--two teachers who cared enough for their students to give them time, attention, energy, and dedication, knowing that they might make a difference for some of the young men and women under their charge. I saw this sort of commitment from teachers everywhere I traveled on my sabbatical, strengthening my belief in American teachers and reaffirming my own commitment to become a better teacher every day.

Not every college and university teacher has it within his or her daily or weekly routine (or job description) to spend time regularly in elementary and secondary schools. Not everyone wants to commit a sabbatical to visiting classes and evaluating elementary and secondary school teaching. But we all have some time. If you want to understand this generation of students and the one to follow and then the next to come--and if you want to do more than bemoan the diminishing quality of students--

take some time to visit classes and schools in your communities. If you get comfortable with that, take a few more minutes to share yourselves with the students. Talk to a second-grade class about Christopher Columbus or Pearl Harbor or John Kennedy. Share your thoughts on the Vietnam Wall with high school juniors. Share a little bit of your research and interest in the Renaissance or slavery or the Holocaust. You will be welcomed by the teachers and by the students--and you will feel good about what you have done. Maybe in that way we can do a little more to help bring out the best--and see less of the worst--in the students who will be coming to college in the new century.