

schooled

**Ordinary,
Extraordinary
Teaching in
an Age of Change**

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Foreword by Ann Lieberman



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introduction

America's teachers: They are the nearly 4 million professionals who educate this country's young people, getting to work each morning in a kaleidoscopic array of classrooms, from regional public high schools down Arkansas roads to charter elementary schools aside Los Angeles freeways to Catholic middle schools near Florida's gated communities. They have been teaching for months or for decades, as a first or second career, on the path to principal or planning a lifetime in front of a whiteboard. Each has chosen to teach for highly individual reasons. Yet out of this multiplicity of school settings, personal histories, and professional motives, two images of teachers haunt, and limit, the discussion of education today.

In one, teachers are incompetents unqualified for better work, slackers who punch the clock of a short workday and spend long summers in hammocks, while draining public coffers and resisting every education reform. In the other, they are self-sacrificing, charismatic spitfires who inspire greatness in their charges by day, grade papers into the night, and single-handedly lift poor neighborhoods into the middle class. Portrayals of teachers in today's education policy climate range from desperately unflattering to wildly unrealistic; they're rarely more than cartoonish.

These contradictory stereotypes have emerged out of a driving narrative that the nation's education system is, simply put, a disaster—and that those who teach our children are overwhelmingly responsible for the mess. In the past few decades, *the* problem of education has been identified as bad teachers, rather than, or in isolation from, distorted national spending priorities, the challenges students face at home, or the insufficient rewards that society accords teachers. This narrative runs counter to most Americans' experience with their own or their children's teachers: The great majority of parents polled say their local schools and teachers are doing an excellent or good job. An unrelenting focus by politicians and the media on what's wrong with schools, however, leads roughly half as many to rate the nation's schools highly.¹ This drumbeat has also set the political climate for sweeping, one-size-fits-all educational reforms across regions, states, districts, and schools with very different cultures, strengths, and difficulties.

Ham-handed critiques of teachers are damaging a profession in which turnover is already high. Estimates of the long-term attrition rate for new teachers range from 20 to 40%, depending on the state.² On top of this,

several million veteran teachers expected to retire in the next decade will need replacing.³ Who wants a hard job, though, that onlookers deem easy? Who wants a career requiring advanced degrees but paying a salary necessitating second jobs? Who wants work requiring great talent and technical skill that is dismissed as the backup plan for those who “can’t do”? To avoid a recruitment crisis, more young people and career changers will need convincing that teaching is socially valued and personally rewarding.

Stereotyping teachers also works to sideline them from key conversations about education. While a handful of K–12 teachers have become media heroes and are occasionally invited to speak on behalf of the rest, there’s been a lot more talking about teachers than talking with them. One study found that only 9% of guests invited to discuss education on cable news networks were educators.⁴ Yet attempts to improve American education where it is lacking depend on the motivation of our dedicated teachers and on a willingness to tap into their expert knowledge about their students and about what works—and doesn’t work—in teaching.

* * *

So who are America’s teachers really? First and foremost, they constitute the nation’s largest workforce. Our biggest employer is not Walmart, Microsoft, or the military; it is our network of schools, public and independent. Including students and all staff, one in five Americans enter a school each day, where they engage in our biggest national endeavor: educating the next generation.⁵

This enterprise’s line workers are its 3.7 million teachers, and they are overwhelmingly women. Long female dominated, teaching is becoming more so: 84% of U.S. teachers today are women.⁶ Despite high unemployment after the Great Recession and attempts to recruit men through alternate routes, the percentage of teachers who are male has been cut in half over the past quarter century.⁷

Many teachers work in institutions unlike the ones they attended. Twentieth-century America essentially had two kinds of schools, public and independent, situated in three basic environments: urban, suburban, and rural. Recently, school types have proliferated to include approximately 6,000 alternative schools, 5,700 charters, 3,000 magnets, 2,000 special education schools, and 1,500 vocational schools.⁸ Ten percent of students attend independent schools, including Catholic, evangelical Christian, and other religious schools.⁹

America’s schoolchildren are more ethnically diverse than ever as a result of the recent great wave of immigration, the second largest in the country’s history. Despite this, individual teachers likely work with groups less heterogeneous by class and race than they would have taught in the 1970s, because of a slow resegregation of schools. And while the profession is diversifying, plenty of students see someone at the front of the classroom who does not look like they do: Eighty-four percent of teachers are White.¹⁰

Sprawl has blurred lines between cities and suburbs, between exurbs and country. While the national media focuses intensely on urban schools, less than one-third of America's teachers work in cities. One-quarter work in rural areas, and the rest work in towns of radically different sizes, geographies, economies, and demographics.¹¹ And more and more teaching is going on outside schools: Parents now educate 1.8 million children at home.¹²

Although the average required or contracted workday is 7 hours and 20 minutes long in U.S. public schools, American teachers report working an average of 53 hours weekly. They spend extra time before and after school on site and at home and engage in a range of activities, from tutoring students to grading assessments to emailing parents.¹³ Because teachers earn relatively low salaries, many work second jobs to make ends meet. One recent report found that many midcareer teachers heading families of four or more were eligible for social service programs for the needy.¹⁴

Yet they are highly educated people, with 56% holding at least a master's degree. Clearly, many teachers could earn more doing something else. They choose the profession for an array of reasons that tend to be quite personal, yet overall they teach for one basic reason: They enjoy it. The majority of those surveyed say they are very or somewhat satisfied with their jobs.¹⁵ This satisfaction, derived from relationships with students, parents, and other teachers, is threatened, however, by countervailing pressures: Teachers are less than thrilled with their pay, status, and—despite public perception of tenure—job security. As a result, the percentage of teachers reporting high satisfaction with their jobs is the lowest it's been since the 1980s.¹⁶

* * *

Whether cast as heroes, villains, or victims, America's teachers find themselves at the center of a sometimes ugly debate, one that can pit them against each other: tenured versus nontenured, young versus old, Black versus White, union versus nonunion, traditional versus charter school. Yet, while politicians, reformers, union bosses, and pundits contribute to the cacophony that serves as our national conversation about education, the voices of those who teach our children daily are barely heard. For this reason, we wanted to gather and share the views of working teachers on some of the key problems under debate—student motivation, college and career readiness, and the achievement gap among them—and some of the controversial solutions being applied to these, such as revamped teacher evaluations, curricular standardization, and increased testing. And because much modern education reform is based on presumptions about what motivates teachers, we wanted to understand *why* they teach.

So we set out to find teachers to talk to. Our goal was to identify a range of individuals—from various regions; in public schools and private academies; early in careers and near retirement; in city, town, suburb, and country—to report from the frontlines of teaching across diverse contexts.

As a high school teacher interested in the daily realities of education and an anthropologist interested in the complexities of culture, we didn't want to cherry-pick a collection of miracle workers from whom America's teaching force would be expected to receive wisdom. Believing that the ordinary work of teaching is extraordinary, we sought instead a more ordinary, extraordinary group: teachers who are competent, motivated, and thoughtful about their work. They weren't hard to find.

On social media, via friends and acquaintances, and through colleagues and education organizations, we put out a call that was answered by teachers from Connecticut to California. Despite working in highly social environments, teachers are paradoxically somewhat isolated from other adults, their work only partly visible to parents, the community, and other educators. As a result, we found many who relished the opportunity to discuss their work. More reluctant were home schooling parents, who can feel even more poorly treated by the media than do schoolteachers—yet because they are one of the fastest-growing groups of educators, we thought they should be part of the conversation. Ultimately, we screened, via email or phone, dozens who offered to be profiled or were recommended to us, choosing from these a mix of nine teachers who would allow us to see teaching in the widest range of schools and communities and whose personal histories were especially compelling. Although men disproportionately volunteered, we selected just two in order to reflect the profession's gender balance.

The teachers included in *Schooled* are neither typical nor outliers. Although they cannot be called representative of the larger group of nearly 4 million American teachers, each possesses a unique authority to speak on a specific set of educational issues. They include women such as Glorianna Under Baggage of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation—where graduation rates are the nation's lowest—on the topic of dropout prevention, and men such as Robert Lewis, a special education teacher at a Colorado middle school and the father of an autistic son, on standardized testing of special-needs children. Their goal and ours is to open a discussion that values the perspective of classroom teachers. And indeed their thoughts on such critical issues provide insight for not just educators but anyone interested in American education.

In their schools, their homes, and their communities, we heard these teachers say and saw them show much more about their thinking and practice than surveys of thousands would provide. Our visits included interviews in which we explored their professional motivations and experiences, challenges and joys, educational philosophy and methods, and reflections on the profession and the state of education. We observed them in their classrooms and communities, where we were able to witness them at work with students, parents, and colleagues. (Note that the names of schoolchildren in our profiles have been changed.) As fellow teachers rather than investigative reporters, we found our conversations with the 9 had an easy, supportive quality that allowed us to go

quickly to the honest and open core of their ideas about education.

On our journey we found, regardless of school setting, a significant disconnection between the problems teachers face in the classroom and some of the solutions that federal, state, and local authorities are rolling out to tackle them. We also discovered important differences between the goals of much modern reform and the fundamental purposes of education as many teachers see them. On the whole, the teachers in *Schooled* take the long view. They see the ultimate purpose of education not as the instruction of children but as the creation of adults. Consequently, they see academics as a means to an end, not the end itself. They see their roles as preparing students for college or career, yes, but even this is a means to an end: the production of socially competent, productive citizens who fulfill their potential. Where teachers vary in interesting and necessary ways is in the particular kind of adult they hope to help create; for one this might be a collaborative global citizen, for another an intellectual innovator or spiritual traditionalist.

Although teachers have found themselves attacked politically at various periods throughout the American past,¹⁷ in this unique historic moment, their ability to deliver on their values is under threat from two sides. On one side, broader social and economic changes are making teaching harder. The list is long: widespread and increasing child poverty, widening income inequality, growing cultural and linguistic diversity, rising rates of children with disabilities, frequent school violence, limited job opportunities and ballooning college costs, contracting public budgets, and persistent racism and segregation. All are sharply felt in the classroom. The most profound of these factors are the basic economics; astoundingly, roughly half of America's public school students come from households without enough resources to sustain themselves.¹⁸

On the other side, education reform efforts at the national and state levels have led to new, often scripted curricula demanding less creativity, ever-changing pedagogical methods and technologies, more standardized testing interrupting learning, a fixation on collecting quantitative data on multifarious elements of teaching and learning, convoluted, even dysfunctional teacher evaluation programs, and declining professional prestige and stagnant compensation. Many teachers emphatically feel their autonomy is being constrained by cookie-cutter approaches and misdirected top-down reforms that devalue and disallow the full exercise of their professional craft—the art and science of teaching. This wasn't true just over a decade ago; before the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top federal initiatives, teachers exercised a good degree of control over curriculum and instruction.¹⁹ Yet if we reduce teachers to an academic delivery system, they are unlikely to achieve either the broader, long-term goals they aspire to reach or the narrower, short-term goals they're pressured to achieve: The glacial rate of improvement in national test scores in reading and math over the past decade is evidence of the latter.²⁰

Schooled's teachers are responding in various ways to this pincer

movement of challenging socioeconomic forces and constricting reforms. When they find them consistent with their educational philosophies, teachers are adopting, even embracing, reform strategies and tactics. South Carolina's Lisa Myrick, for example, a believer in interdisciplinary approaches, is adding lessons on nonfiction reading strategies from the Common Core State Standards to her chemistry curriculum. Such teachers are applying methods they might have employed anyway; none are resisting reforms they recognize as leading to good or improved teaching. At the other extreme, some are opting out of the system altogether, finding it untenable. Ohio home schooling parent Heather Frantz pulled her daughters from school when she saw how little individualized attention they were receiving. And within months of our visit, new teacher Lindsey McClintock left the Arizona classroom in which we saw her take 3rd-graders through scripted lessons, to enter private counseling, where she hopes to provide children with the social-emotional component being stripped from teaching.

And in the vast middle, teachers are working hard to hold on to what they know is good pedagogy. At times they are holding on quite desperately, with some, as one educator put it, "sneaking [in] a lot of good teaching under the table." Others, emboldened by their experience, reputation, tenure, or school climate, are more forthright and vocal in adhering to the strategies and methods they know work best. St. Paul's Ulla Tervo-Desnick, despite official cuts in recess, keeps on taking her 1st-graders outside multiple times a day to develop their physical and social skills. Gary Anderson of suburban Illinois devotes class time to independent reading despite the Common Core's push for teacher-led close reading instruction.

Americans worried about our schools have little to go on from the abstracted and vituperative political discourse about education. At the same time, teachers are subject to a flood of contradictory recommendations and directives, often from outside experts who seek to standardize education across communities that share great similarities but are marked by important differences. The nature of the profession makes it critical that teachers be empowered to live their pedagogical values and to address their students' needs. By opening the door to their classrooms and their lives, *Schooled's* teachers hope to show what they and their students actually experience, and they hope to inspire meaningful conversation about the complex challenges of teaching and learning in America today.