

A SMALL FLOCK OF POEMS FOR TEACHERS

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TRANSFORMATION

*I started kindergarten
Two or three big steps behind.
Some classmates understood things
That had never crossed my mind.*

*The kids who looked real different
Seemed so smart (I can recall).
Kids who looked and spoke like I did
Didn't seem so smart at all.*

*Of course there were exceptions,
But on mostly any day,
It was clear those kids were doing best
And we were just okay.*

*Our teachers liked them better
'Cause they always knew the answers,
So kids like me just tried to be
Good athletes and great dancers.*

*The years went by quite slowly
And most things just stayed the same,
Until our principal decided
It was time to change the game.*

*She hinted that the reason
When those other kids did best
Was that many knew already
More of what was on the tests.*

*They learned it from their parents
And from things they did at home.
Much that I and my companions
Never had the chance to know.*

*That had always been the pattern.
Yes for years it was the same.
But the standards movement came along
To finally change the game.*

*Now that there's a new prescription
For the way our school is run,
Everybody's got new goals to reach.
It's getting to be fun!*

*We're learning to get smarter
'Cause our teachers show us how.
They're all serious about it.
Everyone's important now!*

*Time in class is so exciting
That we seldom fool around.
We might make a joke in passing,
But we quickly settle down.*

*After school we do our homework.
Often in our study groups.
When we need them we have tutors
And they give us all the "scoops."*

*If there's something that's confusing,
It's a temporary thing
'Cause the teachers love to answer
All the questions that we bring.*

*All the counselors and teachers
Work with parents as team
'Cause they share the same commitment
To connect us with our dreams.*

*I love the way things are now.
It all just seems so right!
We still play sports and we're still cool,
But now we're also "bright."*

*That first day of kindergarten
Some of us were way behind.
But today I'm graduating
In a truly different time.*

And Their Children Too

*The child who stands before you
Will some day be in your shoes
And a child will stand before her
Hearing things once said by you.
If your message is uplifting
And your smile is bright and true
She will pass them to her children
In the ways she learned from you.*

Think

*think of the deepest emotions you have –
the feelings that make you explode.
well each of the children you have in your class
carries that same mother load.*

*what is the role that you play in their lives?
the feelings you daily inspire?
do you nurture ambition and make their eyes wide?
do the things you teach build their desire?*

*yours is the power to nurture bond fires
that fuel great ambitions and goals.
so endeavor to do all you can to inspire
your students to be great and bold.*

*there will soon come a day when you'll look up with pride
and know that you did all you could
when you see them on wings way up high in the sky
'cause you taught them and they understood!!*

Persist

*There is no greater frustration
than to be stubbornly misunderstood
by a child who is afraid that she can't learn.
And there is no greater elation
than when the light of understanding
burns away the fear and makes her smile return.*

When it's Over

*the lesson ain't over
'til the skinny kid smiles
and signals that he understands.*

A Brilliant Inspiration!

(Secrets of a recalcitrant student.)

*I tried hard to ignore her,
Never looked her in the eye,
But she kept on talking to me
While I tried to act real shy.*

*I would rather have been playing
Somewhere miles away from her,
But she kept on talking to me
'bout the grades I had to earn.*

*I was getting really tired,
Wanted her to go away,
But I could not think of how to make her vanish.*

*It was after lots of thinking,
I can still recall the day,
That I finally had a brilliant inspiration:*

*There'd be nothing she could tell me
If did all the assignments
And it might be fun to show how much I knew.*

*So I focused on my work a while,
Completed all my papers,
Then I raised my hand to tell her I was through.*

*I think that I surprised her
'Caused she stood there stunned and speechless
And that's just what I'd been wanting her to do.*

Success!

Sure as Sunlight

*there's a child here in your caring
who may someday cure all cancer
but you've got to lay the groundwork
so that it can come to pass.*

*she's a child who hasn't blossomed
so you cannot see her brilliance
but as sure as there is sunlight
she is here now in your class.*

*I can't tell you what her name is
nor her height, nor weight, nor color,
only that she is potentially
a history-making lass.*

How Hard to Push, How Far to Lead

*Who can say how hard to push
The children to excel?
You ask, "How hard is hard enough?"
But don't know how to tell.*

*Childhood years should overflow
With games and lots of fun.
But time is short and pressure high
For learning to get done.*

*The state's new test is coming
And our principal is clear
That our students must be ready
There is a lot to fear.*

*If the scores don't reach the threshold
Then the piper we must pay.
So I guess I'll put the pressure
On my little ones today.*

*But no! That can't be the answer!
Pressure crushes and distorts!
There has got to be another way --
One of a kinder sort.*

*I will take them on a journey
On a road that dips and winds.
When we tire we'll continue --
Learning things of every kind.*

*I will help them deeply value
What that journey has to teach.
They'll excel because I love them
And because of goals they'll reach.*

*At the end of our endeavor
When they take the State's new test
They will know most of the answers
And with smiles they'll do their best.*

No Cause to Yell

*If you teach the joy of learning
You may be surprised to find
That the need push and fuss and shout
Will soon be left behind.*

*When you make that evolution
Deep inside of your own mind,
That will be the day you know
The joy of teaching not the grind.*

*On that day you will no longer
Have to force them to excel,
For they'll know the joy of learning
And you'll never have to yell.*

Flearning

*We need a magic formula
To make a flearning blend.
So kids will keep on learning
Even when the fun begins.*

*With flearning it's amazing
How they run to class and then
Start to grab at books with eagerness
And read with funny grins.*

*You'll find this magic formula
Inside of your own heart
Just think of why you're teaching
And right then the magic starts.*

My Hero

*My teacher is my hero.
She's the captain of our team.
My classmates all adore her.
She taught us all to dream.*

*It's a dream of overcoming
All the challenges we'll face.
She helps us build our confidence—
Prepares us for the race.*

*It's a race into the future
To a place we don't yet know.
We've got to be quite versatile —
Prepared for any foe.*

*My teacher looks for excellence.
She says she'll take no less.
Now when a challenge faces us
We've learned to do our best.*

*I really love my teacher
And I'm sure that she loves me.
When I get to be a grownup
She's the kind I want to be.*

Misguided Love

*I care about my students
More than I can ever say.
When they hug me in the morning
They're so loving.*

*Some are very disadvantaged
And their lives are really hard
I'm especially sympathetic
When they're crying.*

*I allow them just to watch
Until they're ready to join in
Then I praise them to the hilt
For simply trying.*

*Perhaps if I were stricter
They would learn a little more,
But I'm not sure that they can.
So I just love them.*

Is it Really Over?

*It's the end of the semester.
I don't know quite how to feel.
I have finally come to know you,
Now you're leaving.*

*This is our last day together
And my sense of loss is real,
But somehow it isn't right now
To be grieving.*

*I have given my best effort
To prepare you to move on,
So I guess I should be happy
That you're going.*

*I will just have to accept it
That next week you will be gone.
Here's a wish that your success
Is overflowing.*

So long.



Please, my teacher, open up your . . .

heart to care ever more deeply for us;

mind to think ever more creatively about ways of helping us learn;

mouth to seek fresh ideas and feedback (including from us!); and

classroom to join colleagues and parents in a thriving community where as teachers, parents and children together we strive to reach our potential.

okay?

My Principal

*My principal is my hero.
She's the captain of our team.
My colleagues all adore her.
She taught us all to dream.*

*It's a dream of overcoming
All the challenges we face.
She helps us build our confidence--
Prepares us for the race.*

*It's a race to do the best we can
To help our students grow.
They've got to be quite versatile --
Prepared for any foe.*

*My principal seeks excellence.
She says she'll take no less.
Her firm insistence pushes us
To do our very best.*

*I really like our principal
'Cause she inspires me.
As I strive to be a leader
She's the kind I'm trying to be.*

Task 3

Ambitiousness versus Ambivalence: Five short poems about setting goals and planning to do well, or not.

(The Random House dictionary defines “ambivalence” as: 1. *uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite things.* 2. *the coexistence of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object or action.*)

Reasons for Ambivalence

1. Not Smart Enough

Sarah thinks that she’s a dummy
So she has no real ambition.
She just hopes that she gets lucky
When the teacher grades exams.

2. No Expected Assistance

Johnny thinks he’d be successful
If he only had a tutor,
But he thinks that’s not an option
So he doesn’t make big plans.

3. No Encouragement

Heather knows that she is smart enough
And yes, she knows as well,
That all the help she needs is right nearby.
But she doesn’t feel encouraged
So she doesn’t feel ambitious.
She just drifts along and doesn’t really try.

4. Boring and Irrelevant

Shantu feels encouraged
And he understands the lessons,
But they’re boring and irrelevant to him.
He says, “To learn them would be useless.”
So, his daily aspiration
Is to make it through until it’s time for gym.

Reasons for Ambitiousness

Gregory used to be like Sarah, Johnny, Heather
and Shantu,
But this year his teachers told him to believe
That *his brain is like a muscle*
So that if he puts the work in
His high goals will be real possibilities.

Gregory also knows that help
Will always be there if he needs it,
So that even if the work gets really hard,
His ambitions will be justified
And not just idle dreaming
So he plans to try his best to go real far.

Encouragement surrounds him
Since his parents and his teachers
Try in many different ways to let him know
That he’s a very special person
Whose ambitiousness and progress
Make them happier than they could ever show.

Gregory knows that what he’ll learn
Will be important.
And he’s expecting that the process will be fun!
So he’s feeling quite ambitious
Looking forward to his lessons
And to all the great success that is to come.

Let’s do our best to help all children to: (1) feel smart enough to justify setting goals; (2) anticipate that help will be available if needed; (3) expect continuing positive reinforcement from adults; (4) understand that their studies are relevant to their lives; and (5) expect that time on task will be enjoyable. If we do, more will become ambitious goal setters (and, ultimately, industrious learners) like Gregory in the second column above.

HARDSHIPS AND DISTRACTIONS

*I'm going to have my dinner
At my grandma's house today.
My mom is stayin' late for work
To make some extra pay.*

*I've got a lot' a homework
But I'm worried 'bout my mom.
So that makes it hard to concentrate.
My mind feels like a bomb!*

*I've also got to make sure
That I wash some clothes to wear
And I've got to get the stuff I need
To tame my crazy hair.*

*And while I'm doin' that,
I'll use the phone to make some calls
To tell my friends the time and place
For Friday at the mall.*

*And sometime between now and then
I've got to get some dough(\$).
'Cause I ain't going to the mall
All destitute and po'.*

*I know that I should focus
On that test I've got in math,
But my English paper's due soon too.
I need some help real bad!*

*Some teachers think I just don't care
And some think I'm not tryin'.
I think I'm caught in a trap –
Sometimes I just start cryin'.*

*But no one ever sees my tears.
'Cause I just show the tough side.
I like to seem real in control –
If not book-smart, then street-wise.*

*I wish my teachers understood
What it's like to be me.
To see my life the way I do –
The whole complexity.*

*They'd see how hard it is to keep
So many things in focus.
They'd see how blurry things can get –
How stuff can seem so hopeless.*

*My teacher said I best be ready
When I take that test in math.
But I ain't got no help at home.
I never knew my dad.*

*I want to go to college.
But for that I need good grades,
Based on what my grades are now,
There may not be a way.*

*I don't know what I'm gonna do.
I need someone who's wise
To help me figure out which way to turn –
To empathize.*

*But let me stop daydreamin',
'Cause I got a lot to do.
If I don't start my homework soon,
I never will get through.*

*If I try and still can't do it
Then I just won't hand it in.
But if I don't try, I'll never know.
So here goes, I'll begin.*

*Everyday I pray
To find someone to guide me and to care.
Is there any chance that you could be
An answer to my prayer?*

Preschool Foundations

*The children seem so tiny
As they move about the room.
Still, they're complicated people --
So much more than we assume.*

*Each is different from the others.
None the same as all the rest.
So, I strive to understand them
And it puts me to the test.*

*Kiesha likes to count things backward.
Pedro likes to pull my hair.
Franco marches like a soldier.
Herman stands up in the chairs.*

*But each in his or her own way
Is curious and growing;
Learning more about the world each day
With new things that they're knowing.*

*And my job is to be sure they know
That love is all around
And that I am here to help them learn
New words and smells and sounds.*

*No one's job is more important
Than what I do here each day.
Things I teach will shape the future
For these children now at play.*

*As among the first to teach them
I must build a firm foundation.
'Cause for all I know, young Kiesha Jones
Will someday lead the nation!*

*And even if she doesn't
There's a lot that is at stake.
God made me her preschool teacher.
That I'm here is no mistake.*

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Educator Self-Censorship: “We Won’t Say ‘They Don’t Know.’”

(Response to a group of university-level math educators who refused to talk about what inner-city children tend not to know when they arrive at school.)

*There are words we dare not whisper.
No, those words we dare not say
For our enemies they listen –
Poised to pounce from where they lay.*

*Therefore we must be quite careful
Speaking only foolproof words,
So bigots cannot misinterpret
What they think they heard.*

*If we hint at any weaknesses
Or injuries or hurts,
Then the critics and the bigots
Will then use them to assert
That the people we are serving
Are an undeserving lot
Whose frailties and transgressions
Make them all a hopeless blot.*

*So, we mustn’t utter any sound
That might be overheard
By those lurking here among us
Waiting to distort our words.*

*No, instead we will self censor
So that nothing that we say
Can be used against our values
In a wrong or hurtful way.*

*Never mind that this prevents us
From addressing like we could
All the deficits our work could fill –
The ways we could do good.*

*And, instead of striking out to prove
That injuries can heal,
We’ll assert that they do not exist –
We’ll say that they aren’t real.*

*We will say that every child
Arrives with knowledge equal value
And that differences are absent –
Or at least that’s what we’ll tell you.*

*We’ll declare that some arrive with more
But none arrive with less.
We’ll deny the contradiction.
Our semantics at their best!*

*But that cannot be the answer.
No, there is a better way:
We must not allow the bigots
To restrict what we can say.*

*For we know that there are differences
In how students arrive.
There are differences
In what they’ve had to do to just survive.
Our opponents seek to blame the victim
Giving them the rap
Nonetheless we must admit the truth:
There really are some gaps!*

*There are many subtle differences
In what kids understand
And the ways we strive to teach them
Must respond with careful hands.*

*Every child for sure has assets --
Most have loving home relations.
But some nonetheless arrive
With larger holes in their foundations.*

*If we face this fact directly
And do what we need to do
We can fill those gaps with knowledge
To help every child get through.*

*Then the critics and the bigots
That we now seem so to fear
Will have long since fallen silent --
May have simply disappeared.*

*So the next time you self-censor
Give yourself a big dope-slap.
Know that destiny is on our side –
We’ll someday close these gaps!*

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If I Had a Magic Formula
(I Don't, but We Do)

*If I had a magic formula
To clear up your confusion
I would use it in a heartbeat
But no magic do I have.*

*I am but a single person
Who has tried his best to teach you
But with limited capacity
To help you understand.*

*You come to me not knowing
Many things you should have mastered
Long before you ever got here --
Long before this class began.*

*Thus I'm feeling rather powerless
But will not give up on you --
No, not even if you doubt yourself
Just let me take your hand.*

*If all of us who care for you
Commit to work together
I have faith that we can pull away
From doubts that hold us back.*

*If we focus on your progress
And commit to learn together
That might be the magic formula
We never knew we had.*

Maintain the Rhythm

*There are folks who pass among us
Moving steady as the tide
Who we daily take for granted
While upon them we rely.*

*Then there comes a time when slowly
Like the sun that daily sets
That their presence starts to fades away
Though we aren't ready yet.*

*That's the time when we ourselves become
The steady force at hand
That allows those younger than ourselves
To strengthen and to stand.*

*There's a rhythm to the universe
That echoes in your school
From the sounds your feet are making
As you too live out the rule.*

*If you fail to keep the rhythm
There's no one to take your place.
So be diligent
The time has come for you to set the pace.*

© Ronald F. Ferguson, July 2005.

Where Fools and Experts Hovered

*Every year you come the first day back
With things that you've discovered
When you went to all your conferences
Where fools and experts hovered.*

*There together they concocted
All this brand new stuff to do
Then they handed you the package
Wherein you became the fool.*

*You're a fool to think I'm waiting
For your latest great idea
I've developed what I need myself
It's perfect. Don't you fear!*

*When you see my next year's test results
You'll see just what I mean
Then you'll know that you're superfluous
And vanish from the scene!*

*WAIT! I was only kidding.
Blowing off some excess steam'
Please come tell me of this year's idea
I'm sure it's quite a scheme!*

Your Courage and Commitment

*I love the way you've introduced
The new approach we're taking.
I'm really looking forward now
To what we're going to do.*

*I also like the fact that we
Will all do this together
And that no one has the right
To stand aside or be excused.*

*The training you describe
Appears to be so comprehensive
That I really can't imagine
We won't all know what to do.*

*And the fact that you've relieved us
Of some old and stale commitments
Means we'll have the time and energy
To really see this through.*

*So, thank you fearless leader
For your courage and commitment
We have finally got a way
To bring real greatness to this school.*

© Ronald F. Ferguson, November 2005

Johnny's Thirst to Learn

*Johnny had a thirst to learn.
It followed him to school.
It sought a way to quench itself
So Johnny'd be no fool.*

*It followed John from class to class
Where sometimes it did find
Great lessons quite superbly taught
That strengthened Johnny's mind.*

*But sometimes behind other doors
Were classes poorly taught.
The time spent there a total waste
Where effort was for naught.*

*The world cannot afford to leave
A mind like Johnny's thirsty
Please join me in a quest to make
More classrooms great and worthy.*

© Ronald F. Ferguson, May 2006

Concentration

*Dear class I want you all today
To come with me to find
The great untapped potential
Hidden deep inside your minds.*

*As grownups we have failed
To push you hard enough to build
Your capacity to concentrate
To reap your fullest yield.*

*There's a place deep in your consciousness
You've probably never been
Where your brain keeps all the records
Of old thoughts and deeds and friends.*

*When you find the path to get there
You will be amazed to find
That there's treasure beyond measure
Stored right there in your own minds.*

*But you'll never find the pathway
If you fail to join the search
And the first step is to concentrate
To give your brilliance birth.*

© Ronald F. Ferguson, May 2006

Thank You Deborah!

from R. Ferguson, May 25, 2006, on the occasion of your retirement.

*It's not hard to get discouraged
When uncertainty abounds,
When funding just evaporates
And spirits drag the ground.*

*It's not hard to throw your hands up
Then just turn and look away,
If you're hearing lots of promises
But nothing quite persuades.*

*And it's not hard to be discouraged
If you're a person who
Fails to see the great potential
Of the people in your school.*

*It's not hard to be a cynic
If you've never seen the lights
In the eyes of students struggling
To reach their greatest heights.*

*But Deborah Bennett is no cynic
So she's never gone astray.
She's just been an inspiration
That's what ALL her colleagues say.*

*She took on the Tripod Project
Then with energy and spirit,
Worked to elevate the work
Of every teacher who came near it.*

*Deborah Bennett's been a leader
Shown the way to truly serve
So it's time to pay the tribute
She so richly now deserves.*

*We thank you dearest Deborah,
For your service here to all.
We refuse to be discouraged!
We refuse to take a fall!*

*For the work is too important.
There's too much that is at stake.
We will keep on pushing forward
Stopping just for breaths to take.*

*As we do so we'll remember
What you modeled for us all:
That through service we inspire
And together we stand tall!*

Thank you, Deborah Bennett.

© Ronald F. Ferguson, May 2006

They're So Precious!
Misguided Love in Elementary School Classrooms

I care about my students
More than I can ever say.
When they greet me every morning
They're so precious.

They are very disadvantaged
And their lives are really hard
So I'm especially sympathetic
When they're anxious.

If one needs to take a breather
And their manner is respectful
I accommodate the wish
Without resistance.

I don't push them to excel
Because, as we all know too well,
Success in school is not the key
To their existence.

They seldom persevere
So any effort that they make
Is an accomplishment
Deserving recognition.

People say that there are ways
To teach them much more than I do,
But that's just speculation
Based on intuition.

If my kids are really smarter
Than I'm treating them to be,
Then there is great untapped potential
In their minds.

But all I really know for sure
Is that they're precious in my sight.
If I have touched their hearts,
What more is there to find?

Am I misguided?

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A Poem for Rossi

The problem thing with dreams, my friend,
Is one can never know
Which from among them might come true
As living comes and goes.

If only we could know today
What futures might unfold,
We'd know which dreams we should pursue
And which we should let go.

The dream we share in MSAN
Is a broad and deep agreement
That one's ancestry or race
Should have no bearing on achievement.

There's a long way still to go
To make this dream we share come true,
But I value every moment
I pursue the dream with you.

Let us travel on together
With our colleagues and our friends
All together staying on this road
That dips and winds and bends,
'Til we pass the torch to others
Or until it comes to pass
That we reach the culmination
When the dream is true at last.

As I end this poem dear Rossi,
What I'd really like to say
Is that you're a special person
And I'm glad you've come my way.

For a commemorative booklet celebrating Rossi Ray Taylor's leadership of
the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), June 2007

© Ronald F. Ferguson, June 2007

I'm Finally a Principal!

I was once a classroom teacher.
Now I try to run a school.
When I first got the promotion
I thought it was really cool.

I knew it would be a challenge,
But I thought I was prepared,
So I stepped into the job
And started pulling out my hair!!!

Some teachers here expected me
To carry all their burdens
When I gave their burdens back
I was a quite unwelcome person.

And some parents thought they had the right
To pick their children's teachers.
When they didn't get their way
They said I was an *evil* creature.

But I never raised my voice
And always tried to be respectful
Even when I was contending
With adults who were neglectful.

No, instead I tried to model
What I hope will be the norm
When the teachers and the parents
Finally help this school reform.

If we're going to be successful
We have got to have a vision
Wherein grown-ups join together
In a shared and sacred mission.

Anyone who can't accept it
Is quite free to move along
And together we'll rejoice
When those who've held us back are gone.

For the future is upon us
And there is no time to waste
As new first graders learn to read
And soil their hands with paste.

When we blink they'll be in high school.
There is work to do each year
And we'll show the same commitment
To each child who comes through here.

We are here to nurture children
In the best way that we can
Anyone who shares this purpose
I invite to take my hand.

But I will not compromise
With those who choose the status quo.
I say, "One way or the other,
They have got to change, or go."

Yes sometimes it will be stressful
But you'll see that in the end
This will be a school we're proud of
THEN we all can be great friends.

I was once a classroom teacher.
Now I try to run a school.
Yes, it makes me pull my hair out.
Still, I think it's pretty cool.

We Don't Affect Your AYP, But . . .

They say the school would need
More kids like me—that are my color—
Before our test scores made a difference
One way nor the other.

As it is, some folks here just might think
That we're not worth the bother,
But maybe they could just pretend
That we're their little brothers.

Even though it may not help you
To achieve your AYP,
I'm really hopin' hard
That you'll find time to tutor me.

I don't talk much in class
And it may seem that I'm just dumb
But if you just help me out
You'll be amazed when I become
Somebody really quite important
Someone everybody knows
For the problems that I solve
And all the kindness that I show.
Because you see inside this shell
There are the seeds of hidden greatness
And the only thing required
Is that you should find the kindness
In your heart
To help me find a way
To get my greatness out
So the world can reap the harvest
Of the things they'll learn about.

Yes this quiet kids who struggles
In you school right here today
Holds the key to many futures
If you help him find his way.

True, nurturing my greatness
Won't affect your AYP.
Still, I'm hopin' that you'll help me out
And not give up on me.

Or Tommy either!