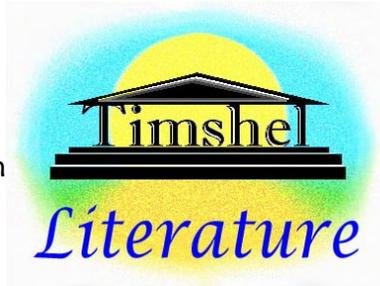


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The Impossible Dream... of Becoming a Teacher?

By Justin Katz

As a writer, I've had to internalize the likelihood of rejection. A person does not pursue a fine art as more than a hobby without knowing the terrible odds, only slightly improved by talent and dedication, against success. But I never expected to discover that the same holds true for my wife's dream of teaching young children.

Knowing that most artistic writers never find success makes finding another source of income both a liberty and requirement for them. However, early-childhood teachers cannot expect to spend their days not teaching and still improve their chances of finding jobs. So, while it hardly makes beginning an adult life financially viable, substituting ostensibly begins the career path that leads to a teaching position. One would think that "putting in time" in this way would lead directly to a teaching position when it provides a school's faculty a positive preview of the hopeful's ability.

As my wife and I were just taught by one Rhode Island public school system, this is not necessarily the case. In fact, although several teachers thought so much of my wife's ability that, over the course of this year, they independently encouraged the principal/superintendent to hire her for a one-year position as a kindergarten teacher, that position went to an outsider.

In conversation with me, the principal stated that my wife was "barely edged out" — and her proven ability outweighed — by the other candidate's impressive portfolio. Despite my obvious personal interest in this decision, I am a staunch supporter of merit-based hiring and was only incited to write this commentary because I consider a demonstrated interest in a *particular* school district and *proven* performance to be aspects of merit.

Add the information, as filtered down to me, that this district tends not to hire its subs, and hints of an ulterior motive arise that stand in stark contrast, though comparable inequity, to the broadly experienced habit within the educational system of nepotistic hiring. I will not guess at these ulterior motives, nor will I duplicate previous columns in *The Providence Journal* by enumerating implications of nepotism. I will, however, suggest that hiring practices that are consistent only in their unfairness do not bode well for the already questionable future of public schooling.

Beyond the question of judgment calls is the consideration of investment in future generations of teachers. Faced with another year of poverty-level income, with little predictability and no benefits, my wife is considering pursuing another career. I think we both know, however, that it would be a mistake for her to leave a profession to which she is so well suited and that brings her so much happiness. Judging by the light in their eyes when they bump into her outside of school, I believe the children that she has reached, even as just a substitute, would agree.

The problem is not ours alone. The larger issue that must be addressed is that our public schools will never improve, no matter how much money we throw at them, if talented and dedicated young teachers are turned away by school systems in which getting a job is as mysterious and indomitable a process as finding a publisher is for writers.

Needless to say, the odds are against my wife's entering the new school year as a substitute — a desperately needed commodity. Sorry kids, the grownups have to play their games.