

What Makes a Great Teacher?

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What makes a great teacher? Everyone has his own idea how to answer this question.

When you think about great teachers, do any particular memories come to mind? We can perhaps all think of a teacher who really made us feel special, made learning fun, and encouraged us to do our best. For those of us who chose teaching as a career, we can probably name one or two teachers who inspired us to follow in their footsteps.

Most of the qualities that made a great teacher when you and I were in school are the same qualities that make a great teacher today. Teachers who make a difference in the lives of children need a caring heart and good classroom management techniques. They also need a thorough knowledge of their subject and an understanding of how children learn.

To someone outside the education arena, a career in teaching may seem easy. I have held many different jobs outside education in my life, but do not hesitate to say teaching is one of the most demanding and rewarding jobs I have ever tried. It is not a job or responsibility we can leave at the schoolhouse when we go home. Social and economic pressures weigh heavily on teachers because so many of our children live in poverty. This causes teachers to worry that their students have enough food to eat and heat to keep them warm on the weekends. Sadly, educators often worry that their students are physically safe from abuse. Teaching can be emotionally as well as physically draining.

Good teaching requires a lot intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Teachers must have a never-ending supply of energy; they must be full of enthusiasm and vitality from the beginning of the day to the end. In addition to their teaching duties, many teachers sponsor after-school activities and their day doesn't end until 10 p.m. or later. Teaching requires time, and great teachers are willing to work extra hours to prepare for class, grade student work, attend meetings, communicate with parents, serve on committees, sponsor student clubs, and coach athletic teams.

In addition to instilling a love of learning in their students, great teachers always seek opportunities to increase their own knowledge. They must be instructional leaders and designers collaborating with other teachers to learn and share strategies to reach their sometimes reluctant students. They are constantly looking for different methods to present information in a way that students can understand.

Great teachers set high expectations for all students. They motivate students to high levels of achievement in their classrooms and don't give up on those who do not achieve success on the first try. They challenge students to help them reach their potential. Great teachers have the ability to monitor all students' behavior while working with small groups or conferencing with individual students. Sometimes they are accused of having eyes in the back of their heads, and of course, every good teacher has mastered the "teacher look" that can control an entire classroom of students with just a glance.

One of the most important conditions for optimal learning is a positive classroom environment. Teachers must create a risk-free environment that encourages students to think outside the box. They help students understand failure is not something bad, but a necessary step toward success. Students must be comfortable expressing their opinion, even if it is different from that of their teacher.

Great teachers must form strong relationships with their students and find ways to show how they care about them as individuals. They must be warm, accessible to parents, and show a commitment to their students and to the school as a whole. As a classroom teacher, I always found my students were willing to strive for excellence and would often go above the already high expectations I had for them when they knew I believed in them and was confident in their abilities to achieve and succeed.

Today's great teachers must have a passion for teaching and for improving the lives of their students. Young people today have access to the world's knowledge through technology. Good teachers help them sift through the information and learn how to use that knowledge to build better lives. Great teachers know a student's future depends on the quality of the education they receive.

Considering all the unique qualities and high level of commitment required to be called a great teacher, I am thankful that so many of them can be found teaching in Whitfield County Schools!