

A Parable of Expectations

By Dennis Payton Knight

This is the parable of Millie Martin, a teacher. She has taught elementary grades for decades in Colorado and she holds a master's degree. It is all she has ever expected to be, inspired to go into education by her second grade teacher.

Mostly Millie's students come in bright and eager to learn every day, but some come hungrier for food and too often hungry for real parenting. Sometimes a child will begin a new school year in her classroom only to be pulled out weeks later because her family had to move. For that same reason, she will often gain new students in the middle of the year.

Millie recognizes those and other family problems as what many children live through, but she approaches every day as an opportunity to do her best for each of them. Her core guiding principle is that any child will rise to what is expected, and without that conviction she might as well have gone into accounting or chemistry. In other words, she's just your average school teacher.

Earlier in her career, she collaborated with her colleagues to find new and better ways to teach children and measure their progress, moving away from methods that framed kids within a static norm. She worked enthusiastically on this with other committed teachers and administrators, even parents. Knowing they were asking for disappointment, they nevertheless set high goals and expectations.

Parents, teachers and school leaders all over the country agreed that developing a culture of challenging goals would improve not only schools but the very process of learning. Lowest common denominators would no longer be the norm, and a child or school that would have been undistinguished but okay under old standards would likely now be reported as needing improvement, but knowing where to focus. This was success, even if incremental, in the same way a millionaire's success comes dollar by dollar.

Then politicians got involved and found it worth votes to twist the logic of high expectations into a stereotype of failing schools. In 2001, Congress and the president followed with a cliché of a national act promising 'no child would be left behind,' setting deadlines and mandating tests on top of tests to celebrate their wisdom.

In the meantime, back in the schoolhouse, a new kid, little Billy, came into Millie's classroom this morning from who knows where. Maybe his family is homeless. He has obviously been left behind, but he will now be included in the next set of numbers showing Millie to be failing in the eyes of politicians.

Except Millie isn't going to leave Billy behind, not today, nor as long as he is hers to teach. So she welcomed him, introduced him to the class, took him by the hand, and got him started. Maybe Billy will someday be a teacher himself, because of Millie Martin. She's an amazing teacher, but she's just about average, and she is just what we expect.