

AN ODE OF APPRECIATION TO OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

This is as good a time of year as any to thank public school teachers for doing a tough job well. There are two high school science teachers in my family. Both are at work early, and both stay late. When at home, they are calling parents about their kids' schoolwork, or fielding calls from parents about anything and everything. I suspect my son and son-in-law are fairly representative of public school teachers across the state and nation. They are good people trying to do good things in a tough environment.

Are all teachers perfect? No. Neither are all CEOs, preachers, doctors, politicians or newspaper columnists. I have no data to back up my theory, but I suspect public school teachers fall into the same proficiency curve as most any other profession: Some are outstanding, most are well-qualified, and a few need to be doing something else.

What separates teachers from most other professions are the obstacles they face daily — government bureaucracy, red tape, second-guessing by the media, political meddling, social engineering, know-it-all school boards, lawyers, out-to-lunch consultants and parental apathy. All the while, trying to force-feed knowledge into a group of adolescents — some who will quit the day they turn 16 because they would rather have a dead-end job than an education. Everybody, from the president of the United States to some doofus on the local school board who probably couldn't pass freshman English let alone supervise those that teach it, has an oar in the educational waters.

Sadly, teachers don't have the respect that they had when I was growing up. That is because the inmates are now running the asylum. My parents backed my teachers to the hilt. Today, parents seem more concerned that their children be able to express their "individuality." They seem to think if their child wears weird clothes and has purple hair, they will have a distinct advantage when they hit the "real world." Little do they know.

Teachers hear a local radio talk show host railing about "pitiful government schools", but the critic wouldn't accept an offer to debate my grandson, a public school student, on the subject of economics just to see how "pitiful" his public education was. (It's a good thing. Zack would have eaten his lunch.)

They read that Gov. Roy Barnes lost his bid for re-election because he was trying valiantly to get rid of "incompetent teachers." Bull feathers. Roy Barnes got beat because of a mean-spirited staff that could tick off Mother Teresa and a poorly-run re-election campaign. "Incompetent teachers" were the least of his problems.

Yes, Georgia's SAT scores are low and, yes, they should be better, but don't put all the blame on public school teachers. The teachers in my family tell me that when the parents are engaged in their children's education, the kids tend to do well. Where parents don't care — well, the kids don't care. Unfortunately, not enough parents care these days. Many consider school a convenient baby-sitting service.

The State of Georgia has only recently made public education a priority, although we have talked like it was for as long as I can remember. For too many years we have been more concerned with getting some dimwit in college so he could play football, rather than whether or not he could read or write. If we worried as much about scoring on the SATs in this state as we do about scoring touchdowns, Georgia would easily be leading the nation in providing a quality education to our young people.

So, this holiday season, give our teachers a break and lay off the pot shots. Besides, most of us couldn't do their jobs even if they spotted us two of the three R's.

In the meantime, my thanks to all the hard-working and dedicated public school teachers in Georgia who are getting a few days respite before heading back to the education wars, especially Ken Yarbrough, a science teacher at Woodland High School in Bartow County, and Dr. Ted Wansley, a science teacher and coach at Chapel Hill High School in Douglas County. I could not be prouder of both and the profession they have chosen. It is a noble calling.