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GEORGIA'S PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS NEED SUPPORT, NOT MEDDLING

As another school year comes to a close in Georgia, hats off to those heroes who labor in the trenches underpaid, underappreciated and under pressure — our teachers.

I have two public school teachers in my family, Dr. Ted Wansley and Ken Yarbrough. Both are high school science teachers, and I wonder sometimes why they do it. It sure isn't for the money. I suspect the reason is the satisfaction they get in having a positive impact on young lives. Not many of us have that kind of opportunity.

There are more self-styled experts with their finger in the public education pie than there are fleas on a dog. Remember the two state legislators who decided for themselves that the school year in Georgia was too long and "interfered with family vacations," and introduced legislation in the session to cut the year back by 10 days? Neither legislator talked to the Department of Education or to teachers before introducing their ill-advised bill. Fortunately, that bad piece of legislation never saw the light of day in the 2007 session and hopefully never will.

Then there is the federal government program, No Child Left Behind. Former Georgia Gov. Roy Barnes co-chaired a yearlong bipartisan commission to evaluate the program. I could have saved the commission a lot of time. I have never seen a federal program that wasn't out-of-touch with reality, full of red tape and loaded with bureaucratic gobbledygook. Why should No Child Left Behind be any different?

One of the recommendations of the commission was for teacher testing. "Teacher quality is the most important factor in improving school equality," said Barnes, "especially in disadvantaged children." Sounds reasonable on the surface, but how do you test teachers fairly? How do you compare a teacher in the inner city with a teacher in the affluent suburbs?

Georgia recently enacted into law the opportunity for parents to send their disabled children to private schools through a voucher system. Where does that leave public schools? Most likely, with those disabled students who are the least educable. How do the bureaucrats factor that into their tests?

How do you test teachers who must deal with impoverished children? My former boss, John Clendenin, retired CEO of the now-departed BellSouth Corporation and one of the most dedicated public education advocates in the country, once said, "You can't teach geometry to a hungry child." Amen.

How do you test teachers who have children mainstreamed in the classroom who can't speak English? Should they slow down the lesson plan and bore the kids who are in class to learn, or should they go full-speed and ignore those non-English-speaking children who don't understand what is being said?

Why don't we first test parents to see if they have a clue about their own role in public education? Require them to understand their child's lesson plan, check their homework daily, make sure they behave at school and punish them when they don't. When we are certain that parents understand their responsibilities and promise to live up to them, then we can rightfully test teachers.

It never ceases to amaze me that well-meaning and learned people can't accept the fact that the problems with our schools start outside the classroom door. Public schools reflect the values and mores of society — no more, no less. Change the environment for the better, and you will change public education. Why is that so hard for people to understand?

In spite of the meddling, second-guessing and finger-pointing from legislators, think tanks and the media, some good things are happening in public education in Georgia, thanks in large part to State School Superintendent Kathy Cox, herself a former school teacher. Superintendent Cox says her goal is to "lead the nation in improving student achievement." There is no question that we have a long way to go, but the important thing is that we have begun the journey.

In the meantime, I suggest to schoolteachers that the next time somebody tells you how to do your job, invite them to spend a year in the classroom. That ought to shut them up.