

The unseen life of a teacher

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Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Chris Smeaton, Superintendent for Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and was published on January 17, 2018. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

Unfortunately, there are some in society who believe they know exactly what teachers do simply because they attended school. Their view may even be more skewed depending on their own experiences as a student, be it compliant, challenging or somewhere in between. The fact is that what students (or ex-students) see in their classrooms is only a part of the art and science of teaching.

I would suggest that teaching is a calling because, quite clearly, not everybody can or wants to shape the lives of children every day. The complexity of our classrooms continues to grow and the mandate of education expands on a yearly basis. Often what has been a home or community responsibility in the past has fallen into the laps of educators. This statement is not meant to elicit sympathy for the teaching profession or forward a victim mentality, but rather acknowledge the multifaceted role of today's teacher.

One of the aspects of teachers as professionals that is not seen on a day to day basis is a commitment to continuous improvement. Beyond a specialized skill set, professionals, athletic, artistic or educational, all seek to get better. We would like to believe that this continuous improvement is limited to professional development days organized by schools or divisions in the yearly calendar, and while those can provide excellent learning, improvement is, or at least should be, an almost daily occurrence.

Teachers are constantly reviewing assessment data, reflecting on their own practice and searching for strategies that engage all students in their classrooms. There are many sleepless nights when teachers can't seem to find the right strategy to assist a struggling student. Some are enrolled in graduate programs and others are engaged in online learning. Professional conversations, engaging in action research and book studies are just some further activities that teachers do invisibly, away from the classroom.

We all know there is a level of mediocrity in all professions. Teaching is no exception. As an employer, it would be naive of me not to realize that skill level and competence varies and that not every teacher is as committed to professional development as they should be. My message to those in education who do not believe and, more importantly, do not engage in continually improving practice is, "Shame on you!" Fortunately, locally, in Alberta and throughout Canada, the majority of teachers believe in their professional responsibility of continuous improvement.

So, the next time you hear somebody talk about the life of a teacher, don't focus on what you see in the classroom or the perceived holidays. Instead, remember the role they play in shaping our future generations, managing complex classrooms and accepting the responsibility of caring for and supporting somebody else's children! And, alongside all of these activities, think about their desire to continuously improve their practice in order to enhance every student's success, part of the unseen life of a teacher.