

# The Answer Sheet



Weather »

Traffic »

By Valerie Strauss

Print | Reprints

## Teacher's resignation letter: 'My profession ... no longer exists'

Posted by Valerie Strauss on April 6, 2013 at 4:00 am



Increasingly teachers are speaking out against school reforms that they believe are demeaning their profession, and some are simply quitting because they have had enough.

Here is one resignation letter from a veteran teacher, Gerald J. Conti, a social studies teacher at Westhill High School in Syracuse, N.Y.:

Mr. Casey Barduhn, Superintendent

Westhill Central School District  
400 Walberta Park Road  
Syracuse, New York 13219

Dear Mr. Barduhn and Board of Education Members:

It is with the deepest regret that I must retire at the close of this school year, ending my more than twenty-seven years of service at Westhill on June 30, under the provisions of the 2012-15 contract. I assume that I will be eligible for any local or state incentives that may be offered prior to my date of actual retirement and I trust that I may return to the high school at some point as a substitute teacher.

As with Lincoln and Springfield, I have grown from a young to an old man here; my brother died while we were both employed here; my daughter was educated here, and I have been touched by and hope that I have touched hundreds of lives in my time here. I know that I have been fortunate to work with a small core of some of the finest students and educators on the planet.

I came to teaching forty years ago this

month and have been lucky enough to work at a small liberal arts college, a major university and this superior secondary school. To me, history has been so very much more than a mere job, it has truly been my life, always driving my travel, guiding all of my reading and even dictating my television and movie viewing. Rarely have I engaged in any of these activities without an eye to my classroom and what I might employ in a lesson, a lecture or a

presentation. With regard to my profession, I have truly attempted to live John Dewey's famous quotation (now likely cliché with me, I've used it so very often) that "Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself." This type of total immersion is what I have always referred to as teaching "heavy," working hard, spending time, researching, attending to details and never feeling satisfied that I knew enough on any topic. I now find that this approach to my profession is not only devalued, but denigrated and perhaps, in some quarters despised. STEM rules the day and "data driven" education seeks only conformity, standardization, testing and a zombie-like adherence to the shallow and generic Common Core, along with a lockstep of oversimplified so-called Essential Learnings. Creativity, academic freedom, teacher autonomy, experimentation and innovation are being stifled in a misguided effort to fix what is not broken in our system of public education and particularly not at Westhill.

A long train of failures has brought us to this unfortunate pass. In their pursuit of Federal tax dollars, our legislators have failed us by selling children out to private industries such as Pearson Education. The New York State United Teachers union has let down its membership by failing to mount a much more effective and vigorous campaign against this same costly and dangerous debacle. Finally, it is with sad reluctance that I say our own administration has been both uncommunicative and unresponsive to the concerns and needs of our staff and students by establishing testing and evaluation systems that are Byzantine at best and at worst, draconian. This situation has been exacerbated by other actions of the administration, in either refusing to call open forum meetings to discuss these pressing issues, or by so constraining the time limits of such meetings that little more than a conveying of information could take place. This lack of leadership at every level has only served to produce confusion, a loss of confidence and a dramatic and rapid decaying of morale. The repercussions of these ill-conceived policies will be telling and shall resound to the detriment of education for years to come. The analogy that this process is like building the airplane while we are flying would strike terror in the heart of anyone should it be applied to an actual airplane flight, a medical procedure, or even a home repair. Why should it be acceptable in our careers and in the education of our children?

My profession is being demeaned by a pervasive atmosphere of distrust, dictating that teachers cannot be permitted to develop and administer their own quizzes and tests (now titled as generic "assessments") or grade their own students' examinations. The development of plans, choice of lessons and the materials to be employed are increasingly expected to be common to all teachers in a given subject. This approach not only strangles creativity, it smothers the development of critical thinking in our students and assumes a one-size-fits-all mentality more appropriate to the assembly line than to the classroom. Teacher planning time has also now been so greatly eroded by a constant need to "prove up" our worth to the tyranny of APPR (through the submission of plans, materials and "artifacts" from our teaching) that there is little time for us to carefully critique student work, engage in informal intellectual discussions with our students and colleagues, or conduct research and seek personal improvement through independent

study. We have become increasingly evaluation and not knowledge driven. Process has become our most important product, to twist a phrase from corporate America, which seems doubly appropriate to this case.

After writing all of this I realize that I am not leaving my profession, in truth, it has left me. It no longer exists. I feel as though I have played some game halfway through its fourth quarter, a timeout has been called, my teammates' hands have all been tied, the goal posts moved, all previously scored points and honors expunged and all of the rules altered.

For the last decade or so, I have had two signs hanging above the blackboard at the front of my classroom, they read, "Words Matter" and "Ideas Matter". While I still believe these simple statements to be true, I don't feel that those currently driving public education have any inkling of what they mean.

Sincerely and with regret,

Gerald J. Conti  
Social Studies Department Leader  
Cc: Doreen Bronchetti, Lee Roscoe  
My little Zu.

## TAGS

'Ill-Conceived Policies',  
Teachers

## « PREVIOUS

Georgia students fight  
segregated proms

By Valerie Strauss April 5, 2013

## 56 Comments

### Comment

[Discussion Policy](#) | [FAQ](#) | [About Discussions](#)

Type your comment here

Sort: **Newest First**  **Comments Live**



**Ortho Stice** wrote:

5:02 PM EDT

I think that I will hang onto this letter and just change the name to my own when I retire in six years.

[Like](#) [Liked by 2 readers](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) · [Flag](#)



**Derek Wilson** wrote:

3:53 PM EDT

The problem is federal government, not right wing conservatives. The Federal Department of Education has never educated a single student. It should be de-funded and shut down. States should decide for themselves what the students are taught, not some bureaucrat in D.C. who hasn't been in a class room for years.

[Like](#) [Liked by 2 readers](#) · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) · [Flag](#)



**AttorneyDC** responds:  
3:56 PM EDT

I agree, Derek. I don't like or understand the federal government's intrusion into the education of our students, including Obama's disgusting Race to the Top (RTTT) program, which forced states to grovel and institute unproven reforms for a small chance at federal dollars.

Like · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:  
5:00 PM EDT

Derek, if you trace the beginnings of the identification of "problems" with American education, they being around 1980, not coincidentally, a couple of years after the establishment of the DOE. In the entire history of the DOE, there has been one SOE who actually spent time in a classroom.

Like · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:  
5:01 PM EDT

Sorry, that should be "begin." Latent dyslexia kicking in.

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**B2O2** wrote:  
3:42 PM EDT

It comes down to this. The right wing, and the corporations they worship like Mammon, wish to commoditize our students - because they are easiest to buy and sell that way.

Be careful what you wish for, conservatives. This is what you will reap.

Like · Liked by 2 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:  
5:10 PM EDT

B2: I love me some right wing bashing, but the roots of this problem lie at the feet of the Dems, most notably James Earl Carter, for establishing the utterly unnecessary, self-aggrandizing Department of Education.

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**mpace77** wrote:  
3:11 PM EDT

So where did things go wrong? When did education system start to fail and what did all these veteran educators do to try and stop it, fix it, etc.?

This should stand as a warning to all professionals, whether you are in banking, health care, education or any other field, don't let the standards decline to where the government steps in because the government will probably make it worse.

Like · Reply · Share · Flag



**PMichaels-Artist-at-large** responds:  
4:54 PM EDT

mpace77: read mvrok1's statement just below; it wasn't until I retired four years ago that I actually had time to start following the politics behind the obvious Education headlines. It has been deeply dismaying to me to realize how LONG ago the changes we see now were seeded by people who know little or cared little about true education. Most teachers in the last 20+ years or so have been so busy coping with the massive changes in our classrooms, i.e., the advent of technology, the inclusion of many different students with disabilities, coping with the effects of students who barely speak English or come from poverty, etc., that it has been next to impossible to discern the political manipulation behind the scenes

Like Liked by 1 reader · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:  
5:05 PM EDT

Mpace77, I am normally a diehard Federalist, but I even I must admit that the establishment of the DOE was one of the worst ideas ever. If you research the evolution of "fixing" American schools, the genesis was around 1980, a couple of years after the establishment of the DOE. To justify its existence, the DOE has invented solutions to problems that did not exist.

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**mvroki** wrote:  
2:39 PM EDT

What a lot of people don't seem to realize is that there hasn't been a blind movement towards testing with no knowledge of its uselessness, rather this is a concerted effort to dismantle the national education model and replace it with private, corporate based Ed that seeks to produce workers, not thinkers. Looking at the heads of companies like ETS and other testing services, they are lead by conservative leaning people who distrust the liberal leanings of education. An education, a proper education that promotes critical thinking is a threat to their top down corporate structure. An education allows people to question authority and this is a threat to their power. Make no mistake. The actions of those on the political right led by the Christian Right, English only folks, the heritage foundation and all other conservative think tanks have had this in the works for decades. Behind every decision to increase testing, evaluation free from anything but raw data is an attempt to keep the masses brainless worker bees, and because successful testing is more attainable if you are white middle class they are turning the white middle class into mindless workers and those non whites into sub citizens, our servants.

Like Liked by 10 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:  
5:17 PM EDT

Mvroki:

I had a FB conversation with a friend the other day. The friend, who happens to be a flight attendant, had posted the comment "what those teachers did in Atlanta makes me sick."

I posed this question: what would you do if the airline determined that your continued employment were contingent on the entire passenger list's performance on a test over the in-flight safety lecture?

That sort of drove home the point.

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**DJWinMassachusetts** wrote:  
1:58 PM EDT

Do you know the story about the drunk under the lamp post? It's an oldie.

Cop sees a drunk crawling around under a street light at night.

Cop asks, "Hey, you! What are you doing?"

Drunk says, "I'm looking for my car keys."

Cop asks, "Where did you lose them?"

Drunk points to the other side of the street and says, "I dropped them over there, across the street."

Cop says, "So, if you dropped them across the street, why are you looking here?"

"Because," says the drunk, "This is where the light is."

Standardized testing is just like this.

Teacher: "Why do you make us use these tests?"

Drunk: "We want to measure the effectiveness of our schools."

Teacher: "But the tests don't measure the effectiveness of education."

Drunk: "Yeah, I know that, but the tests are the only thing we have that gives us a number."

Like Liked by 13 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**HumaneEd2013** wrote:

1:43 PM EDT

A beautifully written and truthful letter -- thank you to the author for having the courage to write this. If readers think this is not the way it is in our supposedly excellent school systems in the Greater Washington area, think again. Teachers here too are subject to the latest fads, demeaning one-size fits all "tasks," and group mind-think. Not since the late 1950's I have seen such conformity (masquerading as "rigor" and "standards.") Bright boomers and smart younger folks are leaving teaching in droves.

Like Liked by 9 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Linda/RetiredTeacher** wrote:

1:35 PM EDT

Three events took place this week, all unnoticed by the majority of Americans, mostly due to the lingering effects of the Great Recession; but soon the facts will come out:

More baby boomer teachers have announced their retirements;

Lower unemployment numbers have been announced;

Many young schoolteachers have decided to leave the profession.

For anyone familiar with history, the above noted trends often precede a huge teacher shortage, especially in urban schools. This time there will be no smart young women without other job options waiting in the wings to take these jobs. No, they will follow the men into the better paying fields. All (as in 100%) of the smart young women I know are in medicine, law, business and academia. I do not exaggerate when I say that I don't know a single college student who is preparing to teach in k-12.

Has anyone noticed how none of the teacher-bashing is coming from Scarsdale, Beverly Hills or Newport? That's because these districts want to remain first in line when the next shortage hits. Of course, D.C. will be desperate again. Will they blame "the unions?"

Like Liked by 8 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Ortho Stice** responds:

5:34 PM EDT

Linda, if I were six years into my career rather than six years from the end of my career, teaching would no longer be my career.

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**GolfLima** wrote:

11:31 AM EDT

All you have to do is look at the Atlanta Public Schools debacle to find out what has become of "teaching". Two dozen teachers and administrators surrendering to law enforcement as a result of grand jury indictments handed down for altering answers on tests used to measure the quality of learning in the schools. In pursuit of the almighty dollar, these people sold out their profession and, more sadly, they sold out the children who relied upon them to "teach".

I once was married to a "special education" teacher who was required to "teach the test" in order to improve the school's rating. It disturbed me then and it horrifies me now to think that integrity has surrendered to expedient grubbing for money.

Shame on them and shame on their union for not considering the needs of the children.

Like Liked by 7 readers · Reply · Share · Flag

---



**Skyline1** responds:  
11:34 AM EDT

How do you know what their union did regarding the needs of the children?

Like Liked by 2 readers · Flag

---



**GolfLima** responds:  
11:37 AM EDT

They were involved in the coverup. It was one of the few times the union and management actually worked together to save their hides.

Like Liked by 2 readers · Flag

---



**Skyline1** responds:  
11:40 AM EDT

HOW do you know this? I can not make the question clearer.

Like Liked by 2 readers · Flag

---



**GolfLima** responds:  
11:42 AM EDT

Subscribe to the Atlanta Journal Constitution and you can read all about what had been going on for the last 3 years. Do the research like they did. If this were of national importance, these reporters would be in for a Pulitzer.

Like · Flag

---



**Skyline1** responds:  
12:03 PM EDT

From your comment I would have thought you had some personal experience with the school system. It is truly a sad commentary on the Atlanta schools. Who hired and supervised those employees?

Like · Flag

---



**redbaronss** responds:  
12:16 PM EDT

The same superintendent that orchestrated the scandal and put so much pressure on showing improvement that those who didn't follow were threatened with losing their jobs.

Like Liked by 1 reader · Flag

---



**Linda/RetiredTeacher** responds:  
12:44 PM EDT

Perhaps you don't know that it was the union who blew the whistle on the cheating. Teachers do not condone cheating.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Flag

---



**Lydia E Glover** responds:  
1:30 PM EDT

I am a Georgia Native (taught in 2 of the surrounding counties..DeKalb and Gwinnett). I have been a

faithful follower of the Get Schooled blog on ajc.com for years (even though I am no longer a resident). For years, teachers have begged for an investigation into the practices of APS in regards to testing and job harassment. What led to the investigation was the high erasure rates that were found in 2009. The AJC gave a complete breakdown of the erasure rate for each and every classroom in APS (right to wrong, etc). Finally, the things that were being uncovered had been spoken of for years.

Also, Georgia does not have unions. There are educational organizations that are basically there in name only and do not fully represent the views/interests/needs of the state's educators.

Like Liked by 8 readers · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**PMichaels-Artist-at-large** wrote:

11:07 AM EDT

This letter is so sadly eloquent; anyone who really understands the teaching profession will recognize that it is close to an epitaph for genuine education.

Like Liked by 11 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**RobBligh** wrote:

10:43 AM EDT

If we continue this politically popular "school reform" nonsense much longer, the only people who will be willing to take teaching jobs will be people who should not be allowed anywhere near children we hope to educate.

Like Liked by 14 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Doctor\_Dru** wrote:

10:11 AM EDT

Did the retiring teacher consider submitting this as an op-ed, in his town and also in the paper serving his state's capital?

Did he copy or forward it to the national and state legislators whose votes impact education - committee members, etc.? And their staffs?

He could offer to testify in front of an education and/or funding committee: in my state there is a link to ask for time for this in the state house. They might welcome his comments, no harm in asking.

How about the local school board? And the accrediting agency for his local district, if any?

It's easy to start advocacy and it goes beyond a whining letter to an old boss, which has a don't-let-the-door-hit-me-on-the-way-out tone.

Start a petition on change.org and accompanying FB and Twitter profiles to discuss. Go on your "my voice" local TV and radio station segments, there are several in my area. Ask the news director or station manager where a local citizen can speak out on an issue. Use those two or three minutes well, and put the audio or tape on the FB and Twitter profile pages.

Most of this can be done from home, on the computer. It costs a bit to drive to the state house, and lobby and appear before committee. This might be money well spent.

Physicians have mort boards to hash out what happened when a pt. dies.

If this writer feels that the profession is mortally wounded, or in danger of lapsing into a coma, speak up. Peers are a first stop. Not the last stop.

Like Liked by 1 reader · Reply · Share · Flag



**District sense** responds:

2:05 PM EDT

Dr dru ,

To suggest you know the avenues he has tried and the results of those attempts if he had is arrogant.

To infer a tone of whining is just mean

Like Liked by 4 readers · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**chekovroom6** wrote:

10:02 AM EDT

No one should deny there are many good teachers in US. However, fact still remains US education system is behind other countries, at least in math and science. Standardized tests make schools and teachers accountable, and gives them a measure of how successful they are in meeting the education goals. General truth is that what gets measured gets improved. Students deserve schools and teachers that can meet the minimum threshold.

Like · Reply · Share · Flag



**Mr\_B** responds:

10:44 AM EDT

You are exactly right on this. What gets improved is the student's ability to perform set tasks in an artificially simplified environment. Standardized testing does not and can not measure real world competence. It does, however, make a lot of money for those in the "educational-industrial complex." It also wastes incredible amounts of time that could have been used to actually teach something valuable, instead of test-taking strategies.

Like Liked by 8 readers · Flag



**redbaronss** responds:

11:13 AM EDT

What is tested? Rote, mechanical skills. Even essays, which should be creative, are given low points if it deviates from the strict format.

Our strength has always been, regardless of what the international test scores say, our creativity, our ability to think outside the box. We are replacing this with standardized teaching, curricula, and tests.

Think about it, what is a better measure of a country's educational success than the number of patents it produces? I suspect if we continue down this path, our patent prowess will decline since the only things that seem to matter are those that can be tested, and not those that are unquantifiable, such as the ability to connect things across the curriculum, or imagination.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Flag



**PMichaels-Artist-at-large** responds:

11:43 AM EDT

@redbaronss: you are so correct on the topic of creativity: Just looking back at the 20th century in the areas of the Film industry, the range of music from Jazz to Broadway to Rock, Medical advances, Architecture, Engineering, Visual Art, etc., there is no question that we led the world.

Squelching creativity via the lock-step standardization march will diminish the spirit and the meaning of our culture, and consequently the production of anything of real worth.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Flag



**Christopher Pennington** responds:

1:45 PM EDT

The U.S. is "behind other countries, at least in math and science," because of slavery.

Like Liked by 1 reader · Flag

**ratty2** responds:

5:26 PM EDT

"Because of slavery"?

Like · Flag

Add your thoughts...



**Skyline1** wrote:

9:55 AM EDT

The winners in the present "education revolution" are the standardized testing companies which extract almost \$2 billion dollars a year from taxpayers across the nation. That loss of money to local schools and the numerous days of no teaching while administering examinations and the days of no teaching while practicing for the tests is taking a huge toll on our schools. These practices must be thoroughly studied and researched to see if they are truly worth anything. Some schools and universities have already decided they are not.

Like Liked by 15 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**wmcmyers** wrote:

9:16 AM EDT

Yes, Mr. Conti, you are right. The profession you have known is on its way to the ash heap of history. Thank God.

No longer are public schools protected from competition. No longer do they hold students and families hostage to an underperforming monopoly. No longer are teachers unaccountable for their performance. No longer are teachers unions the dominant force in education. No longer do we assume that every student learns the same way or benefits from the archaic regimentation of most public schools. And no longer are schools run for the benefit of teachers and administrators, instead of for students.

This, at least, is the direction school reform seems to be taking. Insofar as it benefits students and holds teachers accountable for the results they produce, it is welcome. And that you find it such a hostile environment that you must resign tells us far more about you than about the state of education.

Like Liked by 6 readers · Reply · Share · Flag



**Skyline1** responds:

9:28 AM EDT

If the arrogant wmcmyers had verified his personal knowledge of Mr. Conti's performance and the opinions of his students and of their achievements, I might have been impressed by his post. As it is, I will have to add wmcmyers' comments to the trash bin labeled disgruntled know-it-alls.

BTW, I taught high school science and mathematics from 1955 to 1996, and were I working today, I would most likely be moved to write a similar letter of resignation. Mr. Conti has it right,

Like Liked by 20 readers · Flag



**lkn** responds:

9:54 AM EDT

Wmcmyers, when the current teaching profession is on the ash heap of history, what will the reformed teaching profession look like?

Like Liked by 3 readers · Flag



**musiclady** responds:

10:15 AM EDT

Wmcmyers--I'm a little confused by your comment. When have teachers not been held accountable? As a 37 year veteran teacher, I've been subjected to rigorous evaluations my entire career. This claim that teachers have never been held accountable for their performance is simply not true.

Like Liked by 15 readers · Flag



**Linda/RetiredTeacher** responds:

10:41 AM EDT

wmcmyers:

I'm sorry you had such a bad experience in education. As an American citizen, mine was completely different. Living in a large city, there were many options for my children. I could send them to local public schools, magnet schools or inexpensive parochial schools. According to state law, I could enroll them in the cities in which my husband and I worked or I could enroll them in the neighborhoods

of their babysitters. Of course, I could also move. Like the vast majority of Americans, my spouse and I were hard-working people, so we could provide well for our children. I'm sorry it wasn't the same for you.

Since you suggest that you are not a citizen of this country, you might not realize that the United States of America has the highest productivity in the entire world. Our citizens consistently achieve at levels that continue to inspire and awe the rest of the world in every field of endeavor. Find any prize (sports, arts, science, technology, academic, law, etc.) and American people are often the winners. Most of these accomplished people are products of our public schools.

I'm sorry if you and your own children were not among these. Despite the great riches that our country offers, much of what children receive still depends so much on their parents.

[Like](#) Liked by 9 readers · [Flag](#)



**AttorneyDC** responds:  
4:07 PM EDT

Well said, Linda!

[Like](#) · [Flag](#)

Add your thoughts...

[Load more comments](#)

[Politics](#) [Opinions](#) [Local](#) [Sports](#) [National](#) [World](#) [Business](#) [Tech](#) [Lifestyle](#) [Entertainment](#) [Photo](#) [Video](#) [Blogs](#) [Classifieds](#)

#### More ways to get us

Home delivery

Mobile & Apps

RSS

Facebook

Twitter

Social Reader

Newsletter & Alerts

Washington Post Live

Reprints & Permissions

Post Store

e-Replica

Archive

#### Contact Us

Help & Contact Info

Careers

Digital Advertising

Newspaper Advertising

News Service &

Syndicate

#### About Us

The Washington Post  
Company

In the community

PostPoints

Newspaper in Education

#### Partners

[washingtonpost.com](#)

[Ad Choices](#)

© 1996-2013 The Washington Post [Terms of Service](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Submissions and Discussion Policy](#) [RSS Terms of Service](#)