

I recall vividly a high school lesson in which our wizened and esteemed English teacher asked the class to analyze a poem describing barren trees in the heart of winter. I wrote feverishly throughout the class period about the manner in which the trees symbolized death and loss, quoting verse from the poem to justify my claims. With confidence, I submitted my essay just before the period ended.

Two days later, the essays were returned to all of us during class. I won't soon forget the way that our teacher commented about our collective work. He informed us that virtually every student, save a few, had written in their essays about how the trees in the poem represented death and decay. I became increasingly confident about my analysis - until he began to chide us for falling victim to such a sophomoric conclusion. As he peered over his glasses, he spoke very slowly to the group. "Students, this poem is about trees. Sometimes you really just need to focus on the obvious."

Like so many important lessons learned from memorable teachers over the years, this one has stayed with me. It seems particularly relevant during this difficult time. The face of education has changed abruptly as our society faces down the most substantive threat that many of us have ever experienced during our lifetimes. In the midst of COVID-19, teachers across the land have been required to reinvent themselves in the service of learners and their families. This is occurring on a wholesale basis because educators are committed to the goal that academic learning will continue to progress even during the school closures. Yet, we cannot discount the significance of the social-emotional impact that this pandemic is having on our students (and all of us, frankly). Even in the best situations, teachers are striving to provide education for our children against a backdrop of uncertainty, anxiety, and shared sense of loss. Never before has the obvious seemed so clear. While teaching and learning represent the *work* of the profession, the foundational consideration must always remain the essential needs of the student. For elementary school districts such as River Forest District 90, this focus on the whole child represents the heart of the matter.

This is one of the many reasons why I am so proud and grateful to work alongside the faculty and staff of District 90 each day. While our teachers and staff members have always put students first, the way they are continuing to apply their child-centered lens during this public health crisis has been genuinely inspiring. Obviously, conveying and reinforcing academic content remains an essential goal. The way that D90 teachers are pursuing this goal acknowledges that children cannot learn effectively without the necessary pre-requisites for success, however. These include establishing safe and caring learning environments, being attuned to student needs for support, and conveying clearly that there is always an adult at school who stands "in their corner." Of course, our faculty and staff provide many assets for students beyond these, but right now I think they are the elements that are most vital to ensure our students are able to be their best selves. And they are no small things.

In the midst of this extraordinary moment in time, please join me in thanking an educator, District 90 or otherwise, during Teacher Appreciation Week (May 4-8). Amongst the many other exceptional individuals in our community, they deserve the pedestal they occupy as genuine heroes and unsurpassed role models for our children.

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