

Susan Pelchat
Connecticut Teacher of the Year – 1997

As Connecticut Teacher of the Year I have had the honor of speaking at several convocations, schools, and gatherings of educators, parents, and students. Even the Department of Corrections invited me to address their staff. But one eye-opening discussion made me realize how perceptions of teaching can be formed very early on.

In speaking with a group of high school students about going into teaching, the first topic to emerge was, yes, salaries. Sage advice: start early to save; put away your raises; don't touch your savings for unimportant things. A girl piped up, "Teaching's a good thing for mothers to do because you have a nice schedule."

That led to the next topic, work expectations. Sage advice: If you're going to do a good job, the days can be quite long. If you care about your students, you'll be involved in extra activities. There are a lot of behind the scenes meetings, preparation, and paperwork. "Yeah, but it's a nice schedule if you have kids."

It seemed that no matter how I stressed the responsibilities of teaching, that girl had it in her head that teaching was something that would be nice to do because of the convenient schedule it afforded mothers.

On that day, I had not the words to impress upon her the need to carefully consider what she chose to do for the rest of her life. I was still learning myself. But now, I am ready to profess what it is that makes teaching meaningful, exciting, and something I love to come back to every day. It can be put into a nutshell ~ *Involvement, Commitment, Fulfillment!*

Involvement - jumping in with both feet, putting forth great effort, caring. Working to improve the system, taking on personal professional development because you realize that you need it, starting a club for kids, listening to find out what kids are interested in and then modifying instruction to personalize it to their tastes. Having a book discussion with kids in the hallway. Remembering what they said when you talk with them the next time.

Commitment - wanting to perform to the best of one's ability, assessing and restructuring one's teaching, asking about last year's students because you care to see if they've matured academically, socially, or emotionally. Staying to give extra help during your planning period. Caring about improving conditions that shape the child. Working with teammates to create the best learning environment.

Fulfillment - not the huge paycheck, the boats, or the weekend homes, but the smile at the end of the day, the light bulb brightening overhead, the graduate visiting after many years because you mattered in his life.

Knowing that you did the best you could do with your time, your talent, and your energy; knowing that you made a difference, that is to have succeeded.

And any schedule that can bring about that feeling would be a "nice schedule."