

# ISSUES

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## THE CHRISTIAN, THE CONGREGATION, AND PUBLIC SCHOOLS



## Christians Teaching in a Public School: Two Paths

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I am an associate professor of education in a Christian university. My office neighbors are professors of the humanities. Secretly, I feel like a simpleton in comparison. Recently, while they were in their offices and classrooms addressing some of the most profound ideas in the universe, I was putting up a bulletin board of student work, something a third grade teacher would do, far below the status of a university professor. Just on the other side of the wall I was stapling into, weighty, ageless theories were being brilliantly critiqued. A wave of self-doubt washed over me. Noble as it may be, the teaching profession is essentially a simple, humble, human activity, hardly worthy of inclusion in a university that prides itself on a *U.S. News* ranking and a Fulbright Scholar headcount both in the double digits.

Likewise, when I consider what it means for a Christian to teach in a public school, I realize I can take one of two paths. I can stand outside the public school classroom and explore theoretical, theological, cultural, denominational, and legislative abstractions, wrestling with definitions and pushing conceptual puzzle pieces together. Or I can look inside the classroom at the adults, adolescents, and children who share that crowded space six hours a day. Today I take the schoolteacher route, the bulletin board stapling route, the simple human route.

Do Christian teachers belong in public schools? In general, yes. It's that simple.

Public school is where "the least of these" gather daily. Education is compulsory in the United States, and public schools are where everyone's children go to comply with the law, unless their parents take the initiative to secure another way. Metaphorically—and all too often literally—hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and imprisoned, American public school students are in great need.

Of course, teachers are not doctors, counselors, or missionaries, so they do not spend their six hours a day directly addressing students' physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. But no one except parents has the quantity of direct, sustained contact with young people that teachers have. The quality of that contact can impact students and their families in profound ways.

I believe that the American public school system is flawed in many ways and needs humane reforms from its theoretical foundations on up. Standards, funding, policies, and curriculum are always on the move, and some moves are better than others. But what remains constant is the presence of real human adults and children in face-to-face contact, sorting out conflicts, learning about each other, living together in daily life. The lived experience of being with one another is the essence of what happens in classrooms.

At times, the goals of a teacher for her students conflict with the official agenda of the public school. This is not a new conflict, and it is not unique to Christians. Teachers often feel called to protect students from the effects of bad policies, to promote justice for students who are poorly served by the system, to stand alongside students and families who need something different from what the system wants for them. Christian teachers may or may not become advocates for system-wide change, but they fight on the front lines for students' rights and well-being every day, healing the brokenhearted, bringing freedom to the oppressed, and proclaiming good news to the poor.

Christian public school teachers do have a special secret-agent calling besides what all good teachers do to protect their students, what C.S. Lewis describes as "a great campaign of sabotage." While the public school system scrambles to prepare every student as "college and career ready," Christian teachers labor secretly to prepare every student as spiritually ready to consider God's truths about the big issues of life. Cognitive skills such as reading and reasoning, attitudes such as openmindedness and curiosity, and values such as justice, love, and joy prepare young people to deliberate well and fairly. Developing these skills, attitudes, and values are the lifeblood of good classrooms. A teacher who does her best to lead students to become inquisitive, openminded young people who read carefully, reason well, and value goodness is preparing "good soil" for the seeds of the Gospel.

Finally, I should mention the tremendous power of teachers' personal prayers for particular students that cannot be measured, observed, or even understood, but is no less tremendous despite its indiscernibility.

Cultural critiques, theological judgments, and denominational deliberations may or may not arrive at this conclusion. Nevertheless, the view from inside the classroom indicates that Christian teachers indeed belong in public schools. Specifically, Christian teachers who are excellent in their work and courageous in their faith belong in public schools, ministering to the children of public schools who are ultimately the children of God. The work is not simple, but the belonging is.

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