

A Declaration of Professional Conscience for Teachers

by Kenneth S. Goodman 1990

T here is a time in the historic development of every human institution when it reaches a critical crossroad. Institutions, like people, cannot stand still; they must always change but the changes aren't always for the better. Human institutions are composed of people. Sometimes the people within the institutions feel powerless to influence the directions of institutional change. They feel they are swept along by a force beyond anyone. Yet people within institutions can determine the directions of change if they examine their convictions and take a principled stand.

That's what the founders of American democracy understood when they began the Declaration of Independence with "When, in the course of human events,..."

Education in the United States is at such a crossroad. At the same time that schools have rededicated themselves to equal educational opportunity for all, laws and policies are being imposed on schools that limit the ability of diligent teachers to use their professional judgment to further the personal development and welfare of their students.

There are strong pressures today to dehumanize, to depersonalize, to industrialize our schools. In the name of cost effectiveness, of efficiency, of system, of accountability, of minimal competency, of a return to the basics, schools are being turned into sterile, hostile institutions at war with the young people they are intended to serve.

As teachers we hereby declare ourselves to be in opposition to the industrialization of our schools. We pledge ourselves to become advocates on behalf of our students. We make the following declaration of professional conscience:

W e will make the welfare of our students our most basic criterion for professional judgment. We have no greater accountability than that we owe our pupils. We will work with parents and policymakers to formulate programs that are in the best interests of our pupils. We will work with the kids to personalize these programs. We will respect all learners. We will cherish their strengths, accept and strive to understand their language and culture, seek to further their personal values, tastes, and objectives. We will oppose methods, materials, and policies that have the intent or effect of rejecting the personal and social characteristics of our students. We will, in all matters, and in all interactions, deal with our pupils fairly, consistently, honestly, and compassionately.

We will do all we can to make school a warm, friendly, supportive place in which all pupils are welcome. Our classrooms will be theirs. We will provide guidance and leadership to support our students in the development of problem-solving, decision-making, and self-discipline. We will help them build a sense of respect and support for each other. We will help them appreciate and respect those who differ from them in culture, language, race, color, heritage, religion, sex, weight, height, physical strength or attractiveness, intelligence, interests, values, personal goals, or any other characteristics.

We will not use corporal punishment on pupils of any age for any offense. We believe violence begets violence. We will not use marks or schoolwork as punishment. We will seek causes for problems and work with pupils to eliminate the causes of antisocial behavior rather than simply control the symptoms.

Neither will we use tangible, extrinsic rewards such as candy, prizes, money, tokens, or special privileges as a means of controlling behavior. We regard all institutionalized forms of behavior modification as immoral and unethical. We will work with pupils, building on intrinsic motivation in all areas of curriculum and development.

We will accept the responsibility of evaluating our pupils' growth. We will make no long- or short-range decisions that affect the future education of our pupils on the basis of a single examination no matter what the legal status of the examination. We will evaluate through ongoing monitoring of our pupils during our interactions with them. We will strive to know each pupil personally, using all available professional tools to increase our understanding of each and every one.

We are teachers. We are not actors following scripts. We are not technicians servicing an educational machine. We are not delivery systems. We are not police officers, babysitters, petty despots, card punchers, paper shufflers, book monitors. We are not replaceable by machines.

We are professionals. We have prepared ourselves for teaching by building knowledge of human development, human learning, pedagogy, curriculum, language, and cognition. We know the history of education. We know the competing philosophies of education. We have carefully built personal philosophies that provide us with criteria for making teaching decisions in the best interests of our pupils. We have a broad liberal education and an in-depth knowledge of the content areas in which we teach.

We will use our knowledge base to support our students in their own quest for knowledge. The real curriculum is what happens to each learner. We, as teachers, are the curriculum planners and facilitators. We will not yield that professional responsibility to the publishers of texts or management systems. We will select and use the best educational resources we can find, but we will not permit ourselves or our pupils to be controlled by them.

We will continually update our knowledge of education, of our fields of instruction, of the real world, because of our professional dedication to use all means to improve our effectiveness as teachers. We expect school authorities to support us in our professionalism and self-improvement. And we will oppose all policies that restrict our professional authority to use new knowledge or new pedagogical practices on behalf of our students.

We believe that schools can well serve pupils, parents, and communities if the teachers in them function as responsible, dedicated, and compassionate professionals.

To that purpose we make this declaration of professional conscience.

===== A note from Ken Goodman 20 years later =====

"Institutions, like people, cannot stand still; they must always change but the changes aren't always for the better." That's what I wrote in 1990. I was moved to write this Declaration by what I felt was a critical time for teachers and public education. Then as now, teachers were being blamed for the real and imagined problems of our public schools. My goal was to help teachers to examine their professional beliefs so that they could respond professionally.

The two decades that followed have been marked by great change indeed. Professionalism among teachers throughout the world has increased but the attack on teachers is now an attack on the very nature of public education. Federal policies in the United States have so constricted the ability of teachers to act on behalf of their students that many have taken early retirement or moved to different careers. Major urban school systems are disasters. Teacher certification is devalued and tenure for teachers no longer exists in several states.

Yet the truth is that only teachers can make a difference in the education children experience. There are still heroic, dedicated teachers everywhere who are successful in providing their students with the best classroom experiences possible.

Most teachers knew, when they decided to become teachers, that it was hard work and that the pay was not great. They saw teaching as a fulfilling career and a way of making a significant contribution to their community and nation. Whether or not they are given the respect they deserve they must respect themselves and not lose sight of what makes them professionals.