

Ever Consider Teaching as a Career Option?

by Donald Asher

Ever dream of chucking your career and becoming a teacher? After toiling away in the corporate world for years and years, how hard could it be? Summers off, every major holiday, and really, all the minor holidays too. School lets out at what, like 3:00 p.m. at the latest? Piece o' cake, right?

Maybe not. I spent a week interviewing teachers, and I found out about the real kid nation. Not the rigged social experiment unfolding weekly on CBS, but the real one that's going on in our grade schools, coast to coast, right now.

One new teacher I met with was Elizabeth Jackson. She used to be a vice president of a brokerage house in Beverly Hills, but woke up one day and decided to walk away in search of more meaning. Her employer was slipping into more and more aggressive sales techniques of the lipstick-on-a-pig variety, and she decided to walk. Now she's teaching school in Gerlach, Nevada, a small village in northern Nevada seven miles from a sign that says "Nowhere," and a couple of eternities away from her old life in Beverly Hills.

"I feel like I'm making a difference, and it's sleeping well at night that matters," says Elizabeth. She recommends the experience, but hers was a circuitous route to her first teaching position. "I found a program that'll pay for your master's degree in education in New York. So I checked into it. I toured a school where they wanted me to teach, and the students were throwing chairs out the windows. There were so many kids in the classes. They had 40 kids in a class! Those teachers are faced with an impossible task."

Then she went to the Burning Man festival held near Gerlach, and found the desert serenity irresistible. When the festival was over, she stayed, and talked her way into a job with the local school. Her classes are small, and one has only five students in it. "Our kids out here don't carry guns. They're not on drugs, and we don't really have behavior problems. I think I'm really lucky."

She says she doesn't miss corporate life at all, and now she's busy trying to convince the children of miners and ranchers that they can be the next Louis Pasteur or Quentin Tarantino. She started teaching on a provisional license, but she likes it so much she plans to pay for her own master's degree, and stick with it. But she readily admits that it is frustrating, and that she spends all her waking hours thinking about her job.

Susan W. of El Cerrito, California, just gave up teaching elementary school for exactly that reason. "The stress of it was so encompassing I couldn't lead a balanced life. You care very much about the school and the community. It was six days a week, and you don't leave it when you go home at night. There're staff meetings, grading papers, curriculum development, meetings with parents, and every weekend you try to catch up. I couldn't do this job and do *anything* else."

She is absolutely clear that teaching is not easy. “Teaching is the hardest job I’ll ever have. A lot of it was about managing parents. I taught at a cooperative school, and we had parents in the classroom. They felt they had the privilege of instructing you on the right way to teach a lesson as you are actually teaching it. On the other hand I felt truly blessed to have those parents in the classroom. You *want* parents in the classroom.”

She’s now working for a university, where she finds the workload much more reasonable. She talks about being delighted to have time for a yoga class. Asked about the difference between business and education, she didn’t hesitate to say, “When there are children at stake, it’s a little bit different. So you work every night.”

It helps to have a reasonable class size. Class size mattered to every teacher I spoke with. David Hand is an enthusiastic first-year teacher with the Teach For America program. He is working as a team teacher in a public school in New Orleans with a five-to-one student-teacher ratio. His school is an accelerated program designed to bring students dislocated and traumatized by Hurricane Katrina back up to grade level. Although officially he teaches in a 5th grade class, many of his students are 13 to 15 years old. Some have missed two years of school.

“The first week of school it was chaos,” says David. It’s not been easy establishing discipline, but he reports that he is up to the challenge. “If you don’t set big goals, and get them invested, then they’re just going to see how far they can take you. It’s part of being a leader. You have to set the plan for how this is going to work, let them know that this is *my* classroom.” David greets the students at the door and shakes their hands to set the tone for each class. He is optimistic for his first year of teaching. “We have some amazing kids who are just behind academically and need a hand up.”

Like Elizabeth, David also reports feeling lucky to find a good school. “We don’t have guards. We don’t have police officers. We don’t have metal detectors, but we have an incredible faculty who cares about the students. Many know these students. They know the community. Some of them taught these students’ parents, before, so we have a unique community here. That’s in contrast to a lot of other schools, which do have guards and metal detectors.”

He concludes the interview by saying, “I don’t know what a bad kid is.”

In time, he may get a chance to find out. Glenda S. retired from teaching after being assaulted by a student. She taught in a bedroom community near Little Rock, Arkansas, the kind of town people move to just so their children can attend the public schools.

“It changed over the years,” says Glenda. “When I began, the parents sent their students to school, and the teacher was the professional. By the time I retired, the parents thought they were the professionals.” And the students changed, too. When she began teaching, she had only one child with diagnosable behavioral problems. In her last year as a teacher, 13 out of 25 were on prescriptions for psychoactive drugs.

She tells the story of the assault: “It got so bad with this one child that I had to bring him in off the playground. He was yelling and screaming that he was going to kill me, and he was kicking me and biting me. And when I got inside the (classroom) door, I pressed the buzzer. Two teachers came to my aid. It took three of us to drag him to the office, and then I just collapsed in tears.” She was so traumatized that she couldn’t drive home, and then she dreaded returning to school.

Nevertheless, she loved teaching so much that she stayed another year! She told her superintendent that she didn’t want to retire after this bad experience, but wanted to go out after a good year. “You have some good classes and some not-as-good classes. I had some wonderful years, with wonderful colleagues and supportive superintendents. And I can’t go anywhere without seeing my former students. I go to church with them. I see them in town. I always loved my children, and they still give me a hug.”

When asked if a mid-career professional should quit and go into teaching, she hedges, “No one realizes what it’s like to be a teacher until you’re there. You’re sitting in front looking at 25 or more (students), and every one of them is different, and every one of them has a different need. You go home every night and think, what can I do to spark a motivation in *this* child? In my opinion, it takes a certain kind of person, a devoted person, in order to work with children. You have to have a love for children.”

But when asked to describe the benefits of teaching, her voice took on a reverent, almost transcendent tone. “I don’t think I can put it into words. It’s one of the most wonderful feelings in the world to see that light in the children’s eyes, when they understand what you’re talking about, and they are able to apply it. It’s like walking on air. There’s nothing like it in this world.”

BIO

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*, *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*, *The Overnight Resume*, *Asher’s Bible of Executive Resumes*, and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn’t, and Why*. His web page is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates. Don welcomes your comments at don@donaldasher.com.