

COMMENTARY

David McGrath: I loved being a Chicago teacher, even with the brawls. But it's so much worse for educators now.

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Like a lot of teachers, I began as a substitute for Chicago Public Schools, making \$40 a day filling in for faculty members who called in sick. As a 22-year-old English major, however, I was seldom placed in classes for which I was qualified. Once, for example, I was completely clueless, subbing in a kindergarten at Altgeld Elementary, and I fetched my guitar from the car to strum all afternoon while the 5-year-olds danced around the room.

So after a year of subbing that was more like babysitting, I was thrilled to land a permanent job teaching English at Chicago Vocational High School, known as CVS, for a 1972 salary of \$9,570. I was handed a schedule of five classes totaling 140 students; a “division,” or homeroom, for overseeing the attendance, grades and academic schedules for an additional 28; and one “duty” period.

My duty assignment for one semester was to monitor the lunchroom during seventh period. CVS’ cafeteria was bigger than a gymnasium with seating for hundreds. Teen chatter mixed with laughter made the hour pass tolerably, though some of my fellow faculty monitors routinely wore earplugs.

Less tolerable was when students in one section would suddenly and seemingly all at once hop onto the tables for a better view of, say, a classmate who was having a seizure or, more commonly, two students spoiling for a fight.

Standing on tables was, of course, a violation of rules, but at least it let me know through the crush of students that a brawl had broken out, while also leaving room in the aisles for me and hopefully another faculty monitor to reach the combatants as quickly as possible.

I can’t say how many fights I broke up, but I got used to pulling a brawler away and sometimes pinned their arms, provided another faculty monitor on the scene was simultaneously restraining the brawler’s adversary.

I was still young and quick enough to avoid a wayward left hook and restrain a high schooler for however long it took for them to calm down.



David McGrath's 1989 faculty photo during his time as a teacher at Chicago Vocational High School. (David McGrath)

Some fights were worse than others, as when I was the lone referee between two girls who turned out to be in rival gangs. I concentrated my attention on the more aggressive of the two, whose adrenaline-fueled surge of strength caught me by surprise. I had to use a hammerlock to separate her from the other.

The rest of the day, in between classes, I patrolled the hallway outside my classroom. I took to wearing loose fitting clothes and sneakers, so that I could chase down troublemakers and deliver them to our lone police officer. Often, I failed. One time, a 16-year-old suffered a serious head injury from someone wielding a ball-peen hammer when I couldn't get through a crowd fast enough,

At the end of each day, I reported for bus loading to protect our students at the bus stop while toughs made menacing gang signs from across 87th Street.

Some of my colleagues should have gotten combat pay. CVS' athletic director at the time dislocated his knee while chasing a gangbanger through the school's icy parking lot. And a veteran gym teacher wrested a knife from an enraged student attacking another just outside the English faculty office.

Such experiences were not unique to CVS, as teachers monitoring the lunchrooms, hallways, playgrounds, study halls and bus stops at Chicago's 600-plus other schools will attest.

[Jerald McNair: Many schools face a teacher shortage. How did teaching become an unattractive occupation?]

Yet, in addition to all my fellow teachers and I had to contend with during our tenure in secondary education, today's teachers in Chicago and elsewhere face even more obstacles than pupil behavioral problems. These include inadequate compensation, stricter time demands, lack of administrative support, book bans (in [37 states](#) and counting), and [more and more school boards restricting instruction on gender or race issues](#) and threatening to suspend or fire teachers for perceived violations.

At least [half a million educators](#) have left the profession since the start of the pandemic. In a [National Education Association survey last year](#), 55% of educators declared they were going to leave earlier than they had planned. Burnout in K-12 teachers is widespread.

Increasingly ominous are school shootings, which have been on the rise in the last decade. Last year, there were [51 shootings that led to injuries and deaths](#); this year, there have been at least 27. With most schools conducting active shooter drills and calls for arming teachers increasing with each incident, there's little question that more teachers will exit before adding "armed guard" to their job description.

Low pay and physical demands notwithstanding, I remained at CPS for 20 years because I loved the freedom and art of teaching writing and great literature. Stripped of this autonomy, today's teachers have even less incentive to stay.

“Our nation is undergoing a mass exodus of teachers leaving the classroom,” U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, a Florida Democrat, told ABC News in December. “We can choose to take this issue head on or lose America's teachers and have the education of our students severely impacted.”

What better time than Labor Day, therefore, when we pay tribute to the American worker, for us voters to commit to solving the nation's teacher shortage? We can do so by electing legislators and school board members who support salary increases, collective bargaining rights, mental health programs, academic freedom, freedom of the press and sensible gun regulations.

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