

## **I am a teacher in Florida.**

By Jamiee Miller ( Seminole County Teacher of the Year in 2008)

I am a teacher in Florida.

I rise before dawn each day and find myself nestled in my classroom hours before the morning commute is in full swing in downtown Orlando. I scour the web along with countless other resources to create meaningful learning experiences for my 24 students each day. I reflect on the successes of lessons taught and re-work ideas until I feel confident that they will meet the needs of my diverse learners. I have finished my third cup of coffee in my classroom before the business world has stirred. My contracted hours begin at 7:30 and end at 3:00. As the sun sets around me and people are beginning to enjoy their dinner, I lock my classroom door, having worked 4 hours unpaid.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I greet the smiling faces of my students and am reminded anew of their challenges, struggles, successes, failures, quirks, and needs. I review their 504s, their IEPs, their PMPs, their histories trying to reach them from every angle possible. They come in hungry—I feed them. They come in angry—I counsel them. They come in defeated—I encourage them. And this is all before the bell rings.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I am told that every student in my realm must score on or above grade level on the FCAT each year. Never mind their learning discrepancies, their unstable home lives, their prior learning experiences. In the spring, they are all assessed with one measure and if they don't fit, I have failed. Students walk through my doors reading at a second grade level and by year's end can independently read and comprehend early 4th grade texts, but this is no matter. One of my students has already missed 30 school days this year, but that is overlooked. If they don't perform well on this ONE test in early March, their learning gains are irrelevant. They didn't learn enough. They didn't grow enough. I failed them. In the three months that remain in the school year after this test, I am expected to begin teaching 5th grade curriculum to my 4th grade students so that they are prepared for next year's test.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I am expected to create a culture of students who will go on to become the leaders of our world. When they exit my classroom, they should be fully equipped to compete academically on a global scale. They must be exposed to different worldviews and diverse perspectives, and yet, most of my students have never left Sanford, Florida. Field trips are now frivolous. I must provide new learning opportunities for them without leaving the four walls of our classroom. So I plan. I generate new ways to expose them to life beyond their neighborhoods through online exploration and digital field trips. I stay up past The Tonight Show to put together a unit that will allow them to experience St. Augustine without getting on a bus. I spend weekends taking pictures and creating a virtual world for them to experience, since the State has determined it is no longer worthwhile for them to explore reality. Yes. My students must be prepared to work within diverse communities, and yet they are not afforded the right to ever experience life beyond their own town.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I accepted a lower salary with the promise of a small increase for every year taught. I watched my friends with less education than me sign on for six figure jobs while I embraced my \$28k starting salary. I was assured as I signed my contract that although it was meager to start, my salary would consistently grow each year. That promise has been broken. I'm still working with a meager salary, and the steps that were contracted to me when I accepted a lower salary are now deemed "unnecessary."

I am a teacher in Florida.

I spent \$2500 in my first year alone to outfit an empty room so that it would promote creative thinking and a desire to learn and explore. I now average between \$1000-2000 that I pay personally to supplement the learning experiences that take place in my classroom. I print at home on my personal printer and have burned through 12 ink cartridges this school year alone. I purchase the school supplies my students do not have. I buy authentic literature so my students can be exposed to authors and worlds beyond their textbooks. I am required to teach Social Studies and Writing without any curriculum/materials provided, so I purchase them myself. I am required to conduct Science lab without Science materials, so I buy those, too. The budgeting process has determined that copies of classroom materials are too costly, so I resort to paying for my copies at Staples, refusing to compromise my students' education because high-ranking officials are making inappropriate cuts. It is February, and my entire class is out of glue sticks. Since I have already spent the \$74 allotted to me for warehouse supplies, if I don't buy more, we will not have glue for the remainder of the year. The projects I dream up are limited by the incomprehensible lack of financial support. I am expected to inspire my students to become lifelong learners, and yet we don't have the resources needed to nurture their natural sense of wonder if I don't purchase them myself. My meager earning is now pathetic after the expenses that come with teaching effectively.

I am a teacher in Florida.

The government has scolded me for failing to prepare my students to compete in this technologically driven world. Students in Japan are much more equipped to think progressively with regards to technology. Each day, I turn on the two computers afforded me and pray for a miracle. I apply for grants to gain new access to technology and compete with thousands of other teachers who are hoping for the same opportunity. I battle for the right to use the computer lab and feel fortunate if my students get to see it once a week. Why don't they know how to use technology? The system's budget refuses to include adequate technology in classrooms; instead, we are continually told that dry erase boards and overhead projectors are more than enough.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I am expected to differentiate my instruction to meet the needs of my 24 learners. Their IQs span 65 points, and I must account for every shade of gray. I must challenge those above grade level, and I must remediate those below. I am but one person within the classroom, but I must meet the needs of every learner. I generate alternate assessments to accommodate for these differences. My higher math students receive challenge work, and my lower math students receive one-on-one instruction. I create most of these resources myself, after-hours and on weekends. I print these resources so that every child in my room has access to the same knowledge, delivered at their specific level. Yesterday, the school printer that I share with another teacher ran out of ink. Now I must either purchase a new ink cartridge for \$120, or I cannot print anything from my computer for the remainder of the year. What choice am I left with?

I am a teacher in Florida.

I went to school at one of the best universities in the country and completed undergraduate and graduate programs in Education. I am a master of my craft. I know what effective teaching entails, and I know how to manage the curriculum and needs of the diverse learners in my full inclusion classroom. I graduated at the top

of my class and entered my first year of teaching confident and equipped to teach effectively. Sadly, I am now being micro-managed, with my instruction dictated to me. I am expected to mold “out-of-the-box” thinkers while I am forced to stay within the lines of the instructional plans mandated by policy-makers. I am told what I am to teach and when, regardless of the makeup of my students, by decision-makers far away from my classroom or even my school. The message comes in loud and clear that a group of people in business suits can more effectively determine how to provide exemplary instruction than I can. My expertise is waved away, disregarded, and overlooked. I am treated like a day-laborer, required to follow the steps mapped out for me, rather than blaze a trail that I deem more appropriate and effective for my students—students these decision-makers have never met.

I am a teacher in Florida.

I am overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated by most. I spend my weekends, my vacations, and my summers preparing for school, and I constantly work to improve my teaching to meet the needs of my students. I am being required to do more and more, and I’m being compensated less and less.

I am a teacher in Florida, not for the pay or the hardships, the disregard or the disrespect; I am a teacher in Florida because I am given the chance to change lives for the good, to educate and elevate the minds and hearts of my students, and to show them that success comes in all shapes and sizes, both in the classroom and in the community.

I am a teacher in Florida today, but as I watch many of my incredible, devoted coworkers being forced out of the profession as a matter of survival, I wonder: How long will I be able to remain a teacher in Florida?