

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

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Speaking up for those at risk

TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINDS HERSELF ON A PODIUM AND DECIDES TO USE IT



Former National Teacher of the Year Betsy Rogers, left, meets regularly with teachers at Brighton Elementary School in suburban Birmingham, Ala., to plan ways to boost student learning.

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

“These are the children who haunt me because I know our school failed them, and they are facing a closing window of opportunity. This breaks my heart and, as educators, we should all be heartbroken for all the children that we lose along the way.”
— Betsy Rogers

During her term as National Teacher of the Year, Betsy Rogers often talked about the need for schools to serve at-risk children. She had always worked at Title I schools so she could talk authoritatively about the

challenges of such work. But visiting very affluent schools and very poor schools throughout that year brought the contrast into even sharper focus for her. When her year ended, Rogers decided to put herself back on

NSDC PROFILE
BETSY ROGERS

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the front lines of that work.

She returned to the Jefferson County (Ala.) School System where she had worked for her entire career and asked to be assigned to Brighton Elementary School, one of its poorest schools. Virtually all of Brighton’s students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches. Most students are black but there is a growing Hispanic population. Although the community is only minutes away from Birmingham, Ala., Rogers said it has the flavor of a more rural community. The school has been identified as a school at-risk for many years.

One experience, in particular, brought the issues to the forefront for her. During her year as Alabama Teacher of the Year, Rogers had made regular visits to Brighton with her district’s federal programs coordinator. During one visit, the pair found small snakes in a kindergarten classroom.

In all, 16 snakes were found in this room and Rogers learned that the classroom had been plagued with snakes for two years.

District maintenance workers came that day and plugged the hole in the wall where the snakes were entering the room. An exterminator was called and students were moved to the music room. “The children stayed in the music room for three weeks with no chairs and tables. I am astonished when people wonder why the children in this school are not achieving at the expected level,” she wrote in a blog.

“The snake situation is very symbolic of the gap in the standards we have for schools with high poverty. I live in area where we have four very affluent school systems nearby. I am sure if there were ever a snake in any of these schools, the problem would immediately be addressed. Parents would simply not allow this situation. Yet, (in Brighton), this was tolerated.”

It was this school to which Rogers asked to be assigned. “I was placed in ‘the snake room.’ I felt like this was probably my just reward for telling this story,” Rogers said. She was moved to another classroom several weeks later but reports that the snake room has remained snake-free since that day.

“I just knew this was the place I wanted to be,” she said. “It may not have been the best

BETSY ROGERS

Position: School Improvement Specialist

School: Brighton Elementary School

District: Jefferson County, Ala.

Professional history: Taught elementary and middle school in the Jefferson County School System from 1974 to 1976 and 1984 to 2002.

Education: Doctorate in educational leadership, Samford University. Education specialist’s, master’s, and bachelor’s degrees in elementary education, all from Samford University.

Honors and accomplishments: 2003-04 National Teacher of the Year, 2002-03 Alabama Teacher of the Year. Served as a People to People Ambassador for the Accomplished Teacher Delegation to Australia and New Zealand, July-August 2002. National Board Certified Teacher (elementary education), 2000.

To continue this conversation, e-mail Betsy Rogers at brogers852@aol.com.

thought but I did believe that maybe if I went there, it might shine the light on some of the problems and maybe some other teachers would go there too.”

“I have really become convinced that we have to get our strongest teachers into our neediest schools. We weren’t doing that. I just decided that if I was going to say this, if I was going to believe this, then I had to do this,” she said.

“I had hoped that other National Board Certified Teachers would join me. I’ve asked and asked but I haven’t had any takers,” she said.

When she realized that she could not attract already highly-qualified teachers to Brighton, Rogers said she shifted her focus to building the capacity of teachers already working in the school. Since then, a pre-candidacy class for national board certification has attracted a number of Brighton teachers. In addition, Rogers and the school’s principal have infused the school with job-embedded professional development. She brags that Brighton teachers have had learn-

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ing opportunities built into more than 200 days each year.

Her actual title is school improvement specialist which means that Rogers functions as an all-around improvement coach. “I do whatever I need to do in order to help instruction take place. I model lessons, I’ll substitute when necessary, I attend grade-level meetings, I’ll write schoolwide improvement and accreditation plans. I’ll do anything that will help them,” she said.

Although she was recognized for her exemplary classroom teaching, she acknowledges that working to get other teachers to change their practice is difficult. “It does put you right out there. It’s tough, tough, tough to turn things around,” she said.

“The first year, (she and the new principal) didn’t know if we were going to survive. It was so overwhelming. We were used to a very high-functioning school,” she said.

“We had to start with very basic stuff just getting the school to be functional, like getting classes started on time,” she said.

When she arrived, she learned that most teachers arrived just before the bell rang and didn’t begin getting ready for their day until after that time. That meant that instruction often didn’t begin for about 45 minutes. After repeated messages from Rogers and the new principal, teachers began to start their instruction earlier. “I remember the first day that I walked through and everyone was teaching when the bell rang and I cried,” she said.

Rogers doesn’t try to make excuses for the teachers in her school but she notes that many Brighton teachers have never taught in another school. “They’re like kids in a dysfunctional family. They don’t know what’s normal. They thought that was normal,” she said.

In a blog that she maintained until the end of the last school year, Rogers wrote that she underestimated the needs of Brighton. “My journey the past two years at Brighton School has left me exhausted and feeling more like a novice teacher than a veteran of 24 years. I will say that I am finally feeling like I have some understanding of what it is like to work in a school that has been in multiple years of school improvement. This has been a very unfamiliar world to me, and I

was not prepared for this work,” she wrote.

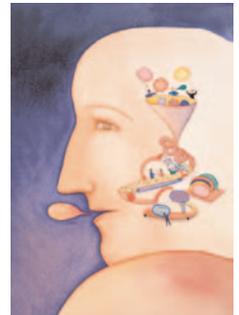
Whether in interviews, speeches, or blog entries, Rogers has been a tireless advocate for the poor children she serves. Her anger and frustration with a “system” that doesn’t share her sense of academic urgency is clear. “If there is one thing I could do for schools ‘under the gun’ for low performance, it would be to simplify life for these schools. Take away all the layers that do not focus on student achievement and send someone into the school who understands the pressure and has real solutions that work. For (those) who think they know, but have never worked in a low-performing school before, I ask you to come live in my trench and learn,” she wrote in one blog entry.

Rogers said she speaks out because she feels like being Teacher of the Year gave her a platform that might enable her to be heard. “I’ve been given an opportunity to be a voice. I never even dreamed that I would do this. As a classroom teacher, I just focused on those kids. I never tried to influence my colleagues. That’s a role that I just ignored.

“But, really, all teachers have to be voices for children. We all join professional organizations and we say that we believe there is nothing more powerful than a teacher’s voice. But we don’t take advantage of that. Even as a regular classroom teacher, you have to speak up and talk to the people in your community, people in your Sunday school.

“I know this is not popular. People look at me like they know I mean well. But a lot of what I say is resented by people. There are those who wish I’d just be quiet and go on. When I talk with educators about this, they can get very defensive. I don’t expect every teacher to do this.

“Children who live in poverty often don’t have anyone to be a voice for them. That is one of my roles as a teacher. I feel like I have an obligation to speak up.” ♦



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