



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

Bad example brings good resolve

The most ineffective educator that I've ever met was a guy — let's call him Joe — charged with providing support to struggling students in one of my previous schools. I feel pretty comfortable saying that in the years we spent roaming the same hallways, Joe never made a meaningful contribution to our building.

Harsh words, huh?

Joe's flaws were many. To start with, entire months could go by where we'd never even see him. We'd joke about "Joe-dini's Great Disappearing Act," wondering how he could support students that he didn't know who were struggling in classes with teachers he'd never met.

Joe made matters worse by constantly reminding everyone that he was responsible for an entire grade level. "I have a caseload of 365 students," he'd say when we'd press him to explain what he had done for one of our kids. "Name 12," we'd mumble, knowing that it would be an impossible task for Joe.

Most frustrating was Joe's insistence that his door was always open. "All you have to do is stop by," he'd say, knowing full well that between teaching, planning, and meeting, there was little chance that we'd take him up on his offer.

Looking back, though, I realize that I learned a lot of lessons about working beyond the classroom from Joe. They include three broad actions that I'm committed to:

BEING VISIBLE: Today's classroom teachers are swamped by new demands. Under constant pressure to perform, they're learning to manipulate data, respond to results, and work together. They're

consumed by responsibility.

That means no matter how open my door is, teachers won't have the flexibility to "just stop by." Instead, it's my job to reach out and look for someone to help.

BEING VOCAL: If I'm honest, I've got to admit that Joe probably did something worthwhile in our school. We just never saw the tangible results of his work.

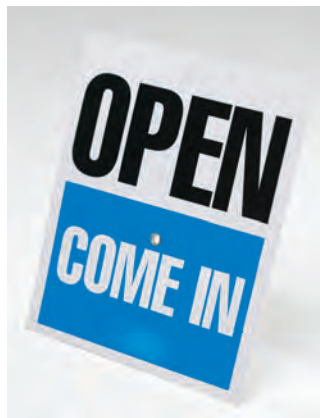
That means I've got to make sure that teachers are aware of the services that I can provide and see examples of what those services look like in action. Without clear pictures of why my work matters, teachers are going to rightfully question my contributions.

BEING HUMBLE: The opportunities that are available to educators practicing beyond the classroom are pretty amazing. From simple perks like having the flexibility to determine our schedule to legitimate rewards like being able to attend county and state professional development sessions, our work carries a sense of importance and professionalism missing for many classroom teachers.

Sometimes it's difficult to remember that the most important — and difficult — work that happens in our school is carried out by teachers. The rest of us have to realize that we're support staffers instead of the all-star team. Our job is to serve.

Does any of this make sense to you? What kinds of actions do you think are important for those working beyond the classroom?

Have you learned any lessons from the Joes in your life? ♦



Bill Ferriter has been a valued contributor to T3 since September 2006. This is his final column.

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