

An Open Letter to Worthington Teachers:
October 17, 2001

By Scott DiMauro

I hope you are finding this school year professionally rewarding and personally satisfying.

Unfortunately, if you're like some of the colleagues I've talked to in recent weeks, you may be feeling a little beat up right now. It seems to many that the bashing of teachers and public education is more in fashion now than ever before. So-called "reformers" apparently believe that more testing and fewer resources will provide the panacea for all that they believe is wrong with our schools. We educators are bearing the brunt of attacks from many fronts, across the country and here in Worthington.

Before getting too discouraged, though, consider these facts:

- 1.) According to a Gallup Poll released August 22, 2001, national approval of public education is at an all-time high. For the first time in the 33-year history of the annual Phi Delta Kappa survey on public education, a majority of U.S. adults give a grade of "A" or "B" to the schools in their community, and support for private school vouchers is plummeting.
- 2.) Public support for the job we're doing here in Worthington is even more solid. The most recent random survey of community members shows that 89% give an "A" or "B" to the quality of instruction we provide, 88% give an "A" or "B" to the quality of our curriculum, 90% give an "A" or "B" to the quality of our co-curricular programs, and 90% give an "A" or "B" to the quality of our teachers. Members of the general public say they like what's happening here.
- 3.) External measures of success are equally as impressive. This year, the Worthington Schools are expected to have met all 27 out of 27 state report card standards. Last year, only 13 out of 611 districts met all 27 state report card standards, and none of those were as large as Worthington. No other central Ohio community can boast having two high schools rated in the top five in the *Columbus Monthly* rankings. No other area school district has earned as many U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Awards. And no other district has been recognized with more Ohio BEST Practices awards.

We are performing at levels higher than ever before, and at least the silent majority of people know it.

In the weeks since the September 11 terrorist attacks, we Americans have demonstrated pride in the thousands of heroes—police officers, firefighters, emergency rescue workers, members of the Armed Forces, and others—who have helped strengthen this nation in the wake of terrible tragedy. This pride has not been limited to acts of courage in New York and Washington. How amazed we were at the October 8 Board of Education meeting in recognizing our own students

who demonstrated extraordinary selflessness as they consoled each other and collaborated to provide relief to the victims of terrorism.

Heroism in this community wasn't invented September 11, though. At our opening day convocation, we honored an individual who has long been a hero for children in this district. Just as the late Gary Smith was respected and admired as a hero by those whom he taught and coached in his distinguished Worthington career, Shyla Wilcox, this year's recipient of the Gary Smith Compassionate Teaching Award, is a hero for extraordinary efforts in making the lives of her Worthington Park students better.

Gary Smith and Shyla Wilcox aren't the only heroes we honor. We have some pretty amazing heroes in every Worthington school. NEA President Bob Chase, addressing last summer's annual Representative Assembly in Los Angeles said, "Public schools are bursting with ordinary people doing extraordinary things." He added, "As educators, heroism is endemic to our work."

Look around you. There are heroes everywhere in this district. When you teach a child to read, to compute, to reason, to communicate, to explore, to show compassion for others, you yourself are a hero because you help to shape the future. Historian Henry Adams wrote, "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

I recently came across a note written to me by one of my former students (named Melissa) which said: "Dear Mr. DiMauro . . . I am so glad that I was able to know you all four years of my high school career, even if I had to be part of a lame homeroom. You have contributed so much to my success and I hope you realize that I could not have been successful without teachers such as yourself." Melissa's note to me speaks to all of us from all 10,000 of the students we have the good fortune to interact with every day.

We all have our success stories. Let's celebrate them. Let us share them with the people in our community, whether through the media or talking over the backyard fence. We cannot stand by and wait for others speak out on our behalf. Don't forget that we all chose to be advocates—for children—by virtue of our choice to become educators.

Another recent Gallup Poll offers evidence that the public will listen to what we have to say. Fifty-seven percent of those polled said the level of honesty and integrity among schoolteachers is high, compared to 56% for physicians, 20% for business executives, 19% for newspaper reporters, 15% for lawyers, and 12% for Members of Congress.

The novelist Thomas Wolfe wrote, "I put the relation between a fine teacher to a student just below the relation of a mother to a son." Be proud of who you are and what you do. Continue to be heroes for the students you teach, but don't keep it a secret. Our own future, our destiny, as well as that of the children we serve, is firmly within our grasp.

Scott DiMauro is a high school social studies teacher currently serving as president of the Worthington Education Association.