



What Could a “New Normal” Mean for Teachers?

As teachers across the nation close out their classes many find the once familiar task of calculating final grades to be much different. In many cases they have been required to use a [variety of less than satisfying year-end grading methods](#). These include assigning grades based on work completed and turned in without any tests, assigning pass/fail grades, or indicating that their students have either “completed” the class or assigning the grade, “in progress.”

While the virus has forced these pragmatic grading methods on teachers, they leave out critical aspects of the more comprehensive end of course grades that teachers have traditionally calculated. In the past most teachers established a variety of work for students to complete in a prescribed period of time, gave grades for on-time and satisfactory completion of these assignments, and factored in culminating assessments of how well students learned the material. These types of grades are appreciated by parents, future employers, and colleges who want to know more than a score on a standardized test. They need grades that communicate how diligently a student applied themselves to their studies combined with an assessment of how much they learned. Experienced teachers often use their grading system to encourage the highest performance from all their students and may adjust their system to take into account changes in class abilities from year to year.

Looking across the nation we see some school leaders thinking that the reopening of schools will be an opportunity for them to cast their own vision for a “new normal” for the schools and, in some cases, these visions could alter the critical role of teachers as the keeper of standards for their students. We see this most clearly in New York State where Governor Cuomo [announced a new partnership with the Gates Foundation](#) focused on using technology and virtual instruction to improve New York schools as

they reopen. Given the incredible wealth of Bill and Melinda Gates this partnership drew immediate attention from [critics who remember with alarm](#) the last time Gates “reimagined” education. The result was a massive investment in standardized testing and the Common Core Curriculum. While there is an important place in education for both good curriculum and some standardized testing, a vision for public education that focuses too heavily on these items would minimize the role of the teacher to the detriment of students.

[The University of California has a much different, but perhaps more insidious idea.](#)

They have abandoned using standardized tests like the SAT as part of their admission standards. The immediate reason given for doing this is the difficulty of administering the test in the wake of the Coronavirus. However, in California the SAT has been frequently criticized by activists who allege that the tests are unfair to minority and low-income students. Janet Napolitano, President of the University of California, recommended that the SAT be suspended until 2024 to allow time to, “create a new test that better aligns with the content UC expects applicants to have learned *and with UC’s values.*” (emphasis mine) Some wonder if Christian values will be compatible with those of the University?

[Pennsylvania is looking at things much differently](#), pointing their schools toward changes that might enhance teachers’ ability to impact the lives of children. To maintain social distancing, they are considering lowering class sizes significantly either through split scheduling or securing additional funding to hire more teachers. Because of uncertainty regarding state revenues, districts are [exhibiting great caution](#) regarding hiring new teachers for next year making split scheduling the more likely reality for next year. This might not be a bad idea. Teachers would be able to work with smaller groups in a more focused way while some of their students are working in another area on computer instruction or doing work supervised by non-teachers to reinforce what they have been taught. If the overall pupil-teacher ratio remains similar to what they have had in the past, teachers should be able to maintain professional oversight of the entire process and adjust both the pacing and the balance of work versus assessment to encourage and motivate their students.

Senator Lamar Alexander (D-TN) seems to have the most robust view of the great importance and need for highly professional teachers. Alexander, the former Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush and former President of the University of Tennessee, in an [interview with EducationNext](#) offered helpful perspective on the important role that teachers will need to play as students return to the classroom.

America isn't a race or a region or a background, it's a belief in shared principles, such as liberty, equal opportunity, and the rule of law. Those principles are always most evident and important in a crisis. Educators have a real teachable moment when they get students back in their classrooms this fall. These millions of students have just witnessed history, and they need context.

Christian teachers have an eternal context that could give students of all ages a solid basis to move forward, replacing feelings of uncertainty created by the Coronavirus with confidence in Christ. One of the most compelling visions of the confidence we have in Christ was shared by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴ "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. ¹ (Matthew 6:25-34)

While those who work in the public schools will not be able to give these words of Christ directly to our students, if these verses permeate our lives, students will see in us the truth of the love and care that Jesus has for them.

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, D.C. Area Director for Christian Educators Association International.

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