

Gorillas Who Have Lawyers

It is very very difficult to get rid of an incompetent teacher.

By Guy Strickland

(Mr. Strickland is an award-winning teacher, principal and educational researcher. He has evaluated thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools.)

Most teachers are nurturing, self-sacrificing and inspiring, but it would be naïve to pretend that they all are. Some are indifferent, some are incompetent, and a few are downright destructive. Best estimates indicate that five to fifteen percent of teachers fall into the “incompetent” category.

Bad teachers are found in public and private schools, in highly-paid positions as well as the poorest school districts. It is quite likely that, sooner or later, one of them will be in your child’s classroom.

In 30 years as an educator, I’ve seen bad teachers in every kind of educational setting and at all levels. As much as it pains me to admit it, there was a time when I saw a bad teacher with each glance at the mirror.

When I first began teaching, there were kids I couldn’t reach, and I didn’t know why. So I blamed it on the kids; those who weren’t “getting it” were dumb, or obstinate, or rowdy. Gradually I figured out that if the child exhibited learning or behaviour problems in the classroom, there was always a reason; and since all kids really want to succeed, the reason was invariably something beyond the child’s control. The more I learned about my students and their learning styles, the better the kids became. And the more I learned, the more I was forced to confront the truth. When I had blamed the children, I was compounding their problems rather than solving them.

I became aware of the bad teacher I had been and conscious of the effects that previous bad teachers had on my current students. As a teacher, I have taught entire classes damaged by a bad teacher’s ignorance and insensitivity. As a school principal, I’ve had to retrain bad teachers and try to get rid of them, a nearly impossible proposition. Now, as an educational consultant, I work individually with students to patch up the damage of bad teaching.

A bad teacher is like a gorilla with body odour: the problem *could* be fixed, but not by you, and then only if the gorilla wants to improve. You can’t fire the gorilla, because he’s got a lawyer who is even bigger and smellier than he is. You can’t get the zookeeper to do anything, because his job is to protect the gorilla, and anyway the zookeeper lost his sense of smell years ago.

Why can’t we fire the gorillas of the teaching profession? It is almost impossible to fire a public school teacher if she has taught more than three years. After about three years, the teacher has tenure, which means that she has job security for life, regardless of the quality of her work.

A tenured teacher’s job is protected by layers of laws and labour union support. To fire an incompetent teacher requires specific, hard evidence. It requires a lot of time to get through grievance processes and through the courts of law. And it requires lots of money. It would cost a school district at least \$50,000, perhaps as much as \$300,000, to get rid of an incompetent teacher.

In a year, the chances of a teacher being fired for incompetence are about 1 in 10,000. For every 10,000 teachers, about 500 to 1,500 are incompetent, but only one will be fired for incompetence, and the other 499 to 1,499 will continue to teach your children. So the classroom becomes a permanent haven for the terminally incompetent. Even a gorilla needs a home.

But pity the poor children who have the share their classrooms daily with the gorillas. Children know nothing of tenure, or lawyers, or indifferent bureaucracies. All they want is a sympathetic adult who can channel their natural love of learning and sense of wonder. What they get is a jaded, aging timeserver with no hope of advancement and no fear of review, who is inspired only by the distant prospect of retirement. It’s not a fair situation, and it is perpetuated only because the children lack a voice in their own behalf.

The entire educational hierarchy has no idea what makes for a good teacher. As a result, they don’t reward the good ones, can’t get rid of the bad ones, and can’t even distinguish the good ones from the bad ones.

(Adapted with permission from Bad Teachers — reviewed on page 3)