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JOHN KENNEDY'S BLOG

Why Our Public Officials Should Try Substitute Teaching

Governor Jindal has made the improvement of our public schools the top priority of his second term. He has promised bold reform. Thank you, Governor.

Constructive change requires understanding, however. How many of the officials who will help craft a new direction for pre-K to 12 have first-hand knowledge of what a 21st century public school classroom is like?

For that reason, the state legislature should ask each of its members, all statewide elected officials and members of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to substitute teach in a Louisiana public school at least one time in 2012. I'm not talking about speaking 20 minutes to a civics class. I mean being an actual substitute teacher—just the public official and 25 kids—for a full day.

Most Louisiana public school systems have a shortage of available substitutes. I've been a volunteer substitute teacher for several years in the East Baton Rouge Parish public schools. I've taught 6th, 7th and 11th graders. I learned a lot.

One of the things I learned was that it is harder to be a teacher today than when I grew up. That's why it's critical to put the best teacher we can in every classroom. Most teachers start around 6:45 a.m., teach an average of five classes, often are assigned lunch room, recess or bus duty, and then have to prepare for the next day. Many are coaches of athletic teams or advisors to school clubs, and are

available out of class to answer students' questions or provide extra help. Teachers today are also expected to be social workers, psychologists, counselors and, too often, parental substitutes.

It's also harder to teach today because of the problem of discipline in the classroom. A single misbehaving student can disrupt an entire class, and too often teachers do not receive support from school administrators or parents in making a student behave.

I also learned that it is harder to be a kid today. 6th and 7th graders in our public schools now experience things I never saw until I was an adult. An 11-year-old should not have to confront challenges like illicit drugs, alcohol, tobacco, teenage pregnancy, bullying, gang violence and parental indifference, but too many do every day in our public schools. Most of us believe, or should believe, that every child can learn, given the opportunity, but try substitute teaching just once and you will see firsthand the socioeconomic issues that distract our kids from taking advantage of that opportunity.

In the past I've suggested several times that the legislature ask elected officials to substitute teach. Some of my colleagues have laughed at me. They won't laugh, however, if they try it, because there's nothing funny about public education in Louisiana and America today. If improvements to our public schools begin in the classroom, as we know they do, shouldn't we ask our state officials to spend some time there? They'll learn more about public education in one day of substitute teaching than by reading entire volumes of policy reports.

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