

Wisconsin Classroom Teachers
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Teachers Offstage--The Occupational Folklore of Wisconsin Teachers: Archie Green Fellows Project, 2013-2014

David Jenks interview, 2014-04-21 : interview conducted by Mark Wagler

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00:00:02 April 21, 2014, Mark Wagler interviewing teacher Dave Jenks in Madison, Wisconsin. Born in Madison in 1960. BS in elementary education from UW-Madison. Began by subbing, then worked at Lincoln Elementary School for 16 years, then Falk Elementary, then Hawthorne Elementary. Now at Hawthorne.

00:01:56 Ethnicity: Welsh and Norwegian. Ethnicity important to dad, not to Dave. Pays more attention as he gets older. Influenced to become a teacher by lots of things: sister was a teacher, as were aunts. Dave's friend Doug suggested he go into teaching because he was good with kids. But even deeper than that, when Dave dies, he wants to feel that he has made the world a better place. Every year he gets 20-25 kids that he gets to know and hopefully point to a better direction, very fulfilling and confirming. Can't imagine doing anything else.

00:04:56 Typical day: Dave arrives early, almost when custodian gets there, turns on lights, computers, music--loud. Cleans room up and envisions the day and what he needs to get prepared--math, reading, social studies--for each group, because not everyone gets the same work. Then greets the students at the door. There is no year that the routine is the same, but there is definitely a routine for each year. The kids know that. Routine revolves around the specials schedule and what grade level you are teaching. If 4th grade, don't have to deal with Strings (music), so has more time to plan day. This year, has a 4th/5th grade combination so does have Strings to deal with. Specials this year at 8:30-9:30, school starts at 7:45, so has extra hour at beginning of day for more planning. Schedule is written down to 5-minute increments. This year, Dave hasn't much freedom in the schedule, was told he has to have literacy from 9:30-11, have to have math from 11:35-1, so that limits what he can do. So starts with attendance, then Dave breaks down the schedule for them. Then for the first half hour, they do something language arts oriented. It's a schedule the kids know, one that is predictable for them, and for kids who need that, it is very comforting for them. So, language arts until 8:30, then specials, and Dave runs around getting ready for rest of day.

00:08:58 At the beginning of this year, had new literacy program called Mondo that they had to do, and had to be at grade level. So, 3 teachers in Dave's teacher group, so other two teachers did 4th grade, had about 20 kids each. Dave with Lisa in his class had 40 kids, so Lisa took the ESL kids and Dave had the other 32 kids. Found--not surprisingly--that this program didn't really work. The reading scores went down--50% of the kids' scores went down. So the teachers changed things on their own, and made it work for the kids. The teachers know the kids and could tailor the program for what they need, and Dave was able to bring two more adults into the school to work with the kids, so he expects scores to go up. It is a reality now

that teachers get judged by the scores kids get. The teachers created a much better curriculum because they did it in-house and skipped the program that they were told they had to do. Back to daily routine, that is what they do in the morning--reading and writing--then lunchtime, the kids go outside. Dave always takes on extra responsibility, because he can.

00:11:08 The detention room teacher has the kids who get in trouble, but she has recess duty, so she has to go outside. Dave always takes those kids from her during his lunch because they need a place and they respond to him well. "So that's my lunch, I don't get one." After lunch, there is Read-Aloud. Then math, has about 4 different groups of kids working at different levels. 1 pm is recess, sometimes Dave has duty sometimes not. After recess, that is the little window of time that the class has, when they can do Social Studies or Science. Dave really hates this year's schedule. He has some Great Blue kids doing work [students doing research and writing for a multiple-school student journal] but not enough kids are interested, unfortunately. Then, at 2, there is another program thrown at the teachers this year, called Intervention and Enrichment, and so Dave has a lot of kids coming and going that last half hour, which he doesn't like, so that is when he can fit more individualized help in. Then at 2:38 (because of cold days, had to tack an extra 6 minutes to each day so dismissal time is 2:38 rather than 2:32) the kids go home.

00:13:32 This schedule contrasts with Dave's time at Lincoln School, where he could make more choices. So, if specials were at beginning of day, could open things up to Great Blue. Great Blue is trying to couple the students' interests with their strengths. So rather than telling them what to study, and how to study it, kids choose what they want to study and how to study it. They learn how to learn. They aren't allowed to ask 'What do I do next?' they have to figure it out for themselves. Was able to take many more field trips then, which is one of the best ways to learn because it involves all the senses. First, Dave worked on kids' manners, then challenged them to help each other rather than tear each other down, act like family and work together, so that they are able to take a week-long field trip at the end of the year. Dave tries to build community immediately; part of that is being a hard-ass. Makes room physically and emotionally safe. Kids want boundaries.

00:17:57 In all Dave's years of teaching, he has seen many kids listed as ED (emotionally disturbed) but he has only found 5-10 kids in all that time that are truly deeply disturbed, not able to follow along in traditional settings like a classroom. Most of the others have been allowed not to follow along, but if you don't allow it, they fall in line and are happier for it. Dave sets up structure at the very beginning of the school year, working on manners and giving them a big goal for the end of the year. From there, along the way, build smaller projects like Great Blue. Dave demonstrates various ways of getting information, very structured at the beginning and looser as the year goes on. By late January, they are working on their own project. When Dave had the freedom to do this project-based teaching, kids were learning reading and writing and math. "When kids have a project that they are invested in, their choice, and are able to find information that's at the cutting edge of what they can read, they are more focused to try to understand it, and they can make phenomenal gains."

Dave kept project time separate from literacy time, because he still wants them to have books that are at their grade level or skill level.

00:20:43 Dave's deepest hope for his students is that they have a happy life, make good choices. How Dave helps students engage with the world outside the classroom: For 18 years now, Dave has taken kids on 3 to 5-day fieldtrips. Starts at beginning of year when they learn manners, earn the end-of-year fieldtrip. They have to write to local businesses--they are given 15 hours of classroom time--to make money to pay for the fieldtrip. If they make enough for a 3-day trip, that's what they go for, or 4 days, or 5 days. They have to be really focused during that 15 hours because Dave won't give them an extra minute, so if they goof around they cost themselves money. They help each other with the editing process, and are almost always successful. During the year, to get ready for the end of the year, they practice performance pieces. Dave has gotten a grant from the school to rent a couple buses, take the kids to a nursing home where they perform. That's part of the trip, giving back to community, and Dave chooses for them to give back to nursing homes because that's where his mom spent the last 6 years of her life, and he knows how lonely those places can be. Having kids come in brightens the day. Kids feel like a million bucks after performing. This year, they will go out for 5 days and will stop at a nursing home every single day, where the kids will perform, and interact with all the people they see at every stop on the trip and where they spend the night. When they get back, the kids write thank you letters to donors, and those letters are usually 5-9 pages long, quite good. Real world service, and real world fund raising.

00:24:03 Describing some of the most meaningful stops on the trip: Single biggest favorite for about half the class is always the nursing homes, because the kids love the human connection. The class has pen pals they will be visiting this year, a kid connection-- Washington Island this year. They always are entertained by Chuck at Kickapoo Valley Reserve, won't see him this year.

00:27:00 Connections between real world and the classroom: When Dave first started, he was more able to bring the real world into the classroom, then allowed to do now. Dave had to fight to get a 5-day trip this year because he was told he wasn't allowed to do it because other classrooms weren't given the same opportunity so why should his kids be? Every year, there seems to be another layer by the legal department that makes it more difficult to get kids involved in real world stuff, which is very frustrating.

00:28:35 Working with colleagues: Depending on the year, teachers are put on teams. The teams Dave has been on have agreed that they should each teach the mandated material in the way that they can teach the best; they don't really collaborate that much beyond what they are required to do; they just let each other go their own ways. Dave volunteers to help with difficult kids, mostly for the rest of the school. He tries to help where he sees a need, whether it's in his contract or part of his job description or not. Social occasions for teachers outside of school do help to build relationships. Dave has participated in such occasions. You do need to be there, and help each other out, and watch each other's back. Dave's in a new school now and hasn't been engaged in as much social stuff, but hopes to. Camaraderie is

important. Staff meetings and institutional meetings don't offer opportunities to talk about the kids; Dave would rather sit down with the people he works with who work with the kids, so they can talk about the kids.

Staff meetings can have good topics; he ends up using them 20-25% of the time; the other 75% of the meeting is a waste of Dave's time. The Heron Network offered Dave a group of colleagues he could really collaborate with; usually he is a lone wolf. The Heron Network is a group of people who have a belief in letting kids explore learning, whether science, culture, math--the kids choose the topic, they assemble the information and write up what they think it means. Published the Great Blue journal every year, usually 150-200 pages of kids' explorations. That was the only group Dave did that kind of work with. This year he has two people who are becoming collaborators--a student teacher and a volunteer from the community. The people who were in the Heron Network have pretty much retired now, and there isn't the opportunity to teach that way anymore. This district doesn't make it easy to do science or social studies any more. Depending on the principal, your opportunity is limited at best.

00:35:12 How have you fit into the culture of your different schools? Dave feels very much a part of the schools where he has taught. He supports everyone he works with as much as he can. He fits in well wherever he goes. Depending on who the principal is, the culture changes. If you get someone who is supportive, it's cohesive--everyone can agree they are going in a good direction--and it's a fantastic place to be. If you get someone who is divisive, it is an awful place to be. Dave's been in both situations. One time, when the principal tried to divide and conquer, that caused the teachers to rally around each other to fend off the aggression. What makes for a good school culture? Letting each other know that you are there for each other--sharing a joke, going out for lunch, sharing a stressful moment with a student, getting through an intense time together--that builds a relationship. On a daily basis, checking in to say 'Hey, how you doing.' There used to be room for teachers teaching out of the mainstream--one thing that attracted Dave to Lincoln was seeing so many people doing big projects all different from each other, with creative control. But as years have gone by, the opportunity has gotten less and less. For young teacher starting now, good luck trying to have a big project on your own. Dave, as a senior teacher, can bend the rules and get away with it, and he does, because he can show that what he does is as good or better than standard curriculum--and his gender and race allow him to get away with it. He is aware of that.

00:39:24 Bends rules for the sake of the students. There was one year he didn't take the class on an end-of-the-year fieldtrip two years ago, because the class was unsafe, and he wasn't willing. It would have been 58 kids, couldn't organize it for two classrooms. So what he did was go outside the school district and created his own after-school class where he could pick and choose the kids he wanted to have in his class, in a very different focus from his usual one. As a result, he had these kids for a few nights a week for a few months and could take them on a fieldtrip the first week of summer vacation, and could do all kinds of things with them, like canoeing, that he can't do during the school year because of restrictions now put on

to the district. Dave's opinion about classrooms: everyone has half the kids who will do whatever you want, then 1/6 are hurt and can't behave in a traditional way because life has beaten them up, then 1/3 sitting back--the fence-sitters--who will go whatever direction they feel will be good for them. If the 1/6--the hurt kids--get rewarded for their behavior, the 1/3 will join in with them, so then you have 1/2 the class out of control, which is the way it was that year. But that isn't generally the way it happens; usually the 1/3, if you make it crystal clear, will join the 1/2 who do what you want and you have a workable situation. And the 1/6 then have a safer place to be themselves.

00:42:06 Teacher stereotypes: depends on your political persuasion. If you are on our side, it's dedicated, putting in extra hours, selfless. And if you're on the other side, it's the polar opposite, selfish, lazy. Dave mostly sees the selfless, hardworking people. But whatever you work, you will see a range of people.

00:43:29 What do teachers talk about? Dave's favorite stories are about when you get a kid who does something fun. Also talk about trouble figuring out how to work with a kid, sometimes just griping about a decision the principal made, or something from downtown. Teachers also check in with each other on their families, day-to-day conversation. Dave gripes about the legal department downtown because there is so much paperwork, classes he has to take, places he isn't allowed to go, extra people he has to take with him.

00:46:00 How teaching has changed: the involvement of the state and federal government in the classroom. Dave doesn't remember standards and benchmarks when he first started teaching--he had to think 'What am I going to teach' because nobody told him. So you could develop these big projects. But now they have all these books, and minutia of what you have to do, and it's crowded and you don't have much freedom to do much of anything. That's the biggest change. Have these changes improved schools? You can make the argument they have. For beginning teachers, it's a good thing, it gives them a guideline. Dave wouldn't have minded it when he first started. Dave remembers one early student he might have burned out the love of learning, because he didn't know what he was doing. For new teachers, it helps to guide them, but then they should be allowed to branch out. It is too tightly controlled now, and expected of everybody.

00:48:35 What does good teaching look like? It feels comfortable. You see a rapport going back and forth, and there is an energy in the room. You see in the kids' eyes they are paying attention. You can walk into a classroom and see the positive interaction going on. When Dave feels he has done a good job, he walks out with more energy than he went in with. To teach well, a teacher needs empathy, and needs to understand the kids. You have to think quickly on your feet and adjust. Have to wear all sorts of hats, and provide a safe space. Have to have academic knowledge, but that is secondary. Dave's old students remember three things about him: the field trip, that he is funny, and that he is strict.

00:54:36 Dave can be funny with kids, maybe did too much when he first taught. He is willing to make himself silly in the eyes of the kids, if that is what they need. Makes lots of side

jokes, all day long, to put them at ease and make it an enjoyable experience. Dave makes himself into a cartoon character, because that is what they are used to these days. You have to move fast, talk fast. He slows it down for kids who need that. Dave tries to make it engaging and fun. Built on lots of experimentation over the years. Some of Dave's characters include Tex, a sarcastic cowpoke; the kids liked Tex better than Dave did, so he stopped doing Tex. Stole an idea from another teacher, to be his own female substitute, every other year so kids wouldn't expect it. So he would come to class dressed up as an old lady. But mostly it's Dave making side jokes about himself or slamming his head into the wall. He has a 3-foot long aluminum wrench called Leo, who is his buddy, which he uses to jokingly threaten students. The kids all get the joke. It keeps kids listening to you.

00:59:50 He and the students kind of make the rules up together. He makes it clear he wants to make it fun, but it is up to them. Dave has realized you can't teach without a safe environment. He had one class that kicked his ass every day; every day was an emotional abuse. But they taught him more than any other class; this was his 3rd or 4th year of teaching. Made him stronger and more able to put boundaries into place. He is consistent with rules, and it works. In order to have the capacity to have many students working on different projects at the same time, you have to have kids who can help each other. You don't start by giving them lots of freedom; they have to develop respect and camaraderie first. You build up with little projects first, to help them be independent. For many kids it's the first time in their lives they have been able to pick whatever they wanted, and they don't want to give that up.

01:03:16 What have you most liked about teaching? Being with the kids and knowing they genuinely appreciate you. Wishes they would allow people with experience to branch off standards and benchmarks. Would tell any beginning teacher, first, to be sure the room is a safe place; second, to have fun; and third, to make it meaningful, make it beyond 3 x 3 is 9. Have a little heart, something real world that connects with the kids. Dave tries to help new teachers; he is advocating to take the tough 4th graders next year so that a younger 4th grade teacher doesn't get burned out. Dave doesn't know how, but knows that he can get to the tough kids, and they believe and trust him. It's a skill and talent he has. He hopes to be able to teach as long as he is physically able to; he made the right choice going into teaching.

01:08:48 End of interview.