



What Defines a Great Teacher?

In this age, when scientific measuring of *everything* has become so important, policy makers have tried to measure knowledge, learning, and the quality of teachers. Many school districts have developed complicated systems for awarding merit pay to teachers, based almost exclusively on each teacher's students' standardized test scores.

I know that many of you chose to enroll your child at RMCS because we do not engage in high stakes testing. This week, children in the third through eighth grades took the Stanford 10, which is a standardized, norm-referenced test, but those scores will not be used to see how your child "measures up to the competition." They will help the child, her teacher, and parents understand her challenges and strengths in the mental, or academic domain.

Besides standardized test results, numerous education experts have tried to define the qualities of a good teacher. Tremendous resources and great minds have been put to the task. Books have been published explaining the behavior a good teacher displays and the data produced from good teaching. Indeed, as executive director, I evaluate all of our teachers every year, which is a very complicated process. For your reference, the summative evaluation criteria I use are listed at the end of this article. If you look at the form, you may be surprised to see that I actually assign a number value to the

level of accomplishment in each skill and performance area, something that I am not entirely comfortable with. I find the narrative I write to be more meaningful.

*Not everything that counts can be measured.
Not everything that can be measured counts.*

—Albert Einstein

Think back through your years of education. Remember your favorite teachers? Take the time to put this article down, and conjure up their images and some of your best school memories...

What made those teachers great? Let's say you can think of four teachers whom you personally regarded as world-class teachers. If there is one patented formula for the qualities of a great teacher, then each of your best teachers must have been pretty similar, right? Of course not! Myself, as I think through the years, I immediately conjure up an image of 4'10" tall Ms. Meglik in fourth grade. Although she really didn't have good control of the class, she was always trying new and interesting things. Class was interesting. I got in trouble a lot that year, but I knew that she really liked me. In high school, there was Mr. Noble who somehow made Geometry *funny*, day after day. For most of you, there were

probably great teachers who were really sweet, and others whose discipline style could be classified as “tough love.” While some were hyper-organized, I bet at least one of your favorite teachers had a room that was jammed with paraphernalia, books, ungraded papers, and all matter of junk jutting out from various nooks. Some of my teachers weren’t particularly innovative. In fact, my all-time favorite teacher, Mr. Fogarty, was a classic lecturer. “Back in the day” teachers could get away with some pretty strange, or even dangerous, behavior. My husband’s high school English teacher, whom he adored and whom he credits with “saving him,” actually smoked cigarettes *during class!*

Our favorite teachers all used radically different techniques and displayed varying behaviors. So what did they have in common? Connectedness. They connected with you *and* they connected with the subject matter. They had spirit.

Truth, not technique, is what heals and empowers the heart.

--Parker Palmer

Fortunately, at RMCS we aren’t pinned down by any policies that strictly define, or measure, who we are supposed to hire as teachers. Although almost all of our teachers and assistant teachers have graduate degrees, we hire people based upon who they *are* more so than what experience or what degrees they have. Happily, teachers who are drawn to Rainbow are naturally the type of people we are looking for – passionate about children, strong in spirit, intelligent, and excited about life-long learning. Although we can’t pay our teachers as well as the public schools can, we can offer them loving support and the time and freedom to teach in whatever style best suits them. And, as RMCS gains a reputation for having a pleasant and rewarding work environment (which it quickly is), we will continue to attract very special educators who have a desire to teach our

children.

As I mentioned in my welcome letter this summer, I believe we have assembled the finest faculty Rainbow Mountain has seen in all of its 31 years of alternative education. Not surprisingly, they display different tastes, talents, and styles. I hope you agree that we have developed a flow from preschool through eighth grade that capitalizes on each teacher’s strengths as students progress through the grades, comprising an intentional and exceptional P-8 program.

Our preschool teachers – Judith, Robe, Jessy, and Brena-- each unique, together comprise a Montessori-inspired preschool that is undeniably Rainbow-- helping children to find their voice and to be kind, yet independent. By contrast, and striking a nice balance, our kindergarten, led by Doreen and Jessica, is more influenced by Waldorf (yet not beholden to Waldorf’s rigidity). Sandra, Ruth, and West, in first and second grades all emphasize nature, creativity, imagination, and myth. They are masters at designing thematic units that offer concrete learning, allowing children to establish a practical foundation, before insisting on too much abstract symbology. Eddy and Amorn in third grade, refine our children’s social/moral and spiritual awareness. By the end of third grade our children are blessed with the ability to form a classroom, or any group, into a heart-felt community.

Up through the end of third grade, our children don’t necessarily see themselves as “students.” Learning is just a natural part of life. But a foundation has been laid that prepares them for the increased academic rigor of the intermediate grades.

Our program shifts in the upper grades, and learning becomes more of a conscious effort. Julie, with her high expectations for students, teaches them that they can work harder than they thought if they stretch outside their comfort zone. Highly organized, Julie catches students, developmentally, at a time when it is important they learn to be responsible for keeping track of their belongings and organizing their time. Then

comes Lauren, undeniably a master teacher and a deeply spiritual being, who further challenges students to always do their best and to become heroes. Finally, the Omega program comes full circle from preschool. Adolescents once again focus on finding their voice, discovering who they are by learning to work together while becoming independent. This year Chris Waddell is teaching Mysteries Council and the male Gender Mysteries, cornerstones of our spiritual, emotional, and social curriculum. Susan's effervescent enthusiasm and deep caring promote a positive social culture, and William's scientific mind encourages students to explore the depths of their imagination while discovering the secrets to the universe. By combining all of these factors with a high quality academic program, Rainbow graduates enter high school as motivated, confident learners who seek a higher purpose in life.

All of these teachers are very different. Each has their challenges, and each their strengths. Together, they are wrapped into a cohesive program that emphasizes their best qualities so they and their students can shine. Shine on, Rainbow kids!♥

HOW DO WE NURTURE OUR COLLABORATIVE, LOVING COMMUNITY?



How do we nurture our collaborative, loving community? That is the essential question* our faculty decided upon for this year. *Community* is the most essential aspect of our school, and we don't want to take it for granted.

Volunteering: I am always impressed by people who volunteer extensively. They give so much of themselves, yet they seem to be the people who expect the least. Their generosity is astounding! Here they are paying tuition, yet their attitude is not one of paying for a service, but paying *to serve*. They are generally happy, and they tend to have fewer complaints. Perhaps this is because they so intimately understand the circumstances of the school that they know everyone is doing their best and operating with their best intentions. They can see beyond blemishes in order to recognize true beauty. I think it is also because when they see a problem they feel empowered to help fix it. Their giving is truly unconditional. Thus, their sense of gratification. Volunteering is one of the many ways we nurture our collaborative, loving community.

♥Thank You♥

**The term "essential question" is the same as a "through line" or an over-arching theme.*

Education from the Heart, for the Heart

What does *Educating the Heart* mean?

How important is the spiritual domain?

How can it be taught?

Is RMCS religious?

Is Rainbow still fulfilling the spiritual vision of its founders?

Community Circle
 Wednesday
 October 7
 3:45-5:00 PM
 3rd Grade Classroom

Have you ever wondered about any of these questions?

*Then you will find the discussion at our next community circle interesting and rewarding. Please join **all the teachers** and myself (Renee, the director) for an in-depth discussion.*

Teacher Summative Evaluation Rating and Evaluator Narrative Section

Key: Low Performance

1 2

Average Performance

3 4 5

Exceptional Performance

6 7

Planning and Preparation	Rating:
Examples: Knowledge of subject matter; selecting instructional goals, unit and lesson planning, curriculum work	
Comments:	

The Classroom Environment	Rating:
Examples: Respect and rapport; culture of learning; sense of cooperation, mindfulness, and a "sacred space for learning"; physical space and management of materials; relationship to and among students feels special.	
Comments:	

Instruction	Rating:
Examples: Delivery; student activities, flexibility, engaging students, pacing, differentiation, Communicating objectives and directions, higher order thinking, assessment, tracking ongoing student progress, checking for understanding	
Comments:	

Holistic Teaching and matching RMCS philosophy	Rating:
<p>Examples: All five domains are abundant; arts are integrated; student directed learning; the essential learning skills are taught; service learning; thematic projects; multi-sensory learning, Multiple Intelligences</p>	
<p>Comments:</p>	

Parent Satisfaction	Rating:
<p>Parents express desire to enroll in teacher's classroom Parent perception of classroom and children's experience is positive Parent perception of communication to parents and cooperation with parents is positive Teacher is viewed as a good role model of RMCS's values and philosophy</p>	
<p>Comments:</p>	

Professionalism		Overall Rating:
<p><u>Individual item ratings:</u> Record keeping and paperwork Ethical, professional behavior Engaging families Ability to self evaluate and reflect Use of newly learned strategies/techniques</p>	<p>Follow-up and follow through Relationships with colleagues Communication Service/participation to the school and program Advocacy Decision making</p>	
<p>Comments:</p>		

Why does RMCS have so many teacher training days, conference days, and teacher work days?

Why does RMCS have so many teacher training days, conference days, and teacher work days resulting in 19 fewer student contact days than North Carolina public schools? I have been asked this question by several parents in the past year. It's a valid question, and one I don't mind answering, because I believe the answer will help parents understand more about our school and our philosophy. Of course, I realize that no school calendar is ideal. However, I feel strongly that if we are going to have a traditional school year (meaning a long summer break), our calendar is best suited to meet the needs of our program without sacrificing quality. (Personally, I would prefer a year-round school year with the same number of students days, but a six-week summer break; and three week fall, winter, and spring breaks. Then, teacher training and conferences could be at the beginning and the end of sessions.)

As an introduction to this treatise, I think it's important to point out that the question is essentially one of quality versus quantity. I'm sure everyone would rather have Rainbow quality than public school quantity (that's why you are here). I'm hoping some of the information below will help parents understand how teacher training, work days, and conference days provide the quality some of us may take for granted, or may not attribute to the fewer students days at RMCS. After reading the logic behind our calendar, the disadvantages and diminished returns of more school days, and the advantages to our current number of student contact days, it should make a lot more sense.

First, some background information...

Historically, RMCS has always had a much shorter school year than the public schools, which ranged in the 160-day area. Last year we had four fewer student days than the year prior, which made the shorter school year more apparent. This year, we gained two of those days back by starting classes before Labor Day.

Second, let's compare how much RMCS teachers work and train, compared with Asheville public school teachers. Since I'm sure Rainbow parents realize our teachers are working hard already, I think it is important to realize that if we extend to a 180-day school year, we would be asking them to put in *more* days and hours than public school teachers. As it is, our teachers work almost as many required days as Asheville elementary teachers (remember, even when the children are off, our teachers are usually at school in training, conferences, or meetings). Plus, they attend teacher meetings every Tuesday until 5:00 pm. Therefore, they are working about the same number of required hours as public school teachers. Additionally, of the faculty days RMCS teachers have with no student contact, they spend *far more time* training and collaborating in meetings. By contrast, Asheville teachers only have two full training days, the rest of the "off" days are teacher work days after school starts, where teachers primarily work alone on lesson plans or grading. Our teachers only receive two work days (to prepare for conferences).

Here's why I believe a shorter school year is beneficial to the quality of our program:

The value of teacher training: Research has clearly indicated that the more time teachers spend training the higher quality the program. That is why public schools that are trying to have a quality program, but are required to schedule 180 students days (such as Evergreen Charter School), schedule a 1/2 day *once a week* for teacher training.

There has been no consistent research evidence indicating that the number of contact days makes any difference in academic achievement. In fact, significant studies show that *fewer* student days are more effective as long as there are a high number of quality teacher training days. (My information mostly comes from debates in Colorado where the argument was between a 160-day school year versus 145 days.)

Many states with more progressive, effective educational programs long ago abandoned the 180 student days calendar. I think the public schools in Colorado, where most of my leadership experience comes from, provide an interesting perspective. Colorado requires a 160-day school year (rather than 180 as in North Carolina), but schools can opt for a shorter school year if they provide rationale. The year my previous school went from a 160-day school year to a 4-day week with 147 student days, was the same year we became a "school of

excellence.” Our elementary program ranked in the top 2% of the state. We directly attributed the shorter school week with our success because of the extra training, planning, and collaborating time the teachers had.

When my previous school went to a four-day week, we also discovered that children were happier and more at ease when they were not putting in a “40 hour work week.” Children are not cut out for so many school hours, and there are significant diminishing returns on how much they can benefit from school beyond about 24 hours a week. If you think about your own learning rhythms, we tend to understand things better after a period of rest.

Planning time: It is easy to take it for granted, but the creative lesson plans here at Rainbow - especially the ones that involve rounding up interesting hands-on materials or making plans for excursions off campus - require an inordinate amount of preparation time (as opposed to teaching out of a text book). Obviously, teachers can only plan when they are not teaching, meaning evenings and weekends. *First-year teachers typically need to spend as much, or more, time planning and preparing as teaching.* Most RMCS teachers consider Sunday a work day. By interspersing training days and teacher work days, teachers can find time and inspiration for *quality* holistic lesson plans.

Efficiency: The typical public school day is terribly inefficient in its use of time – time between classes, lining up to go to specials (such as music, art, etc.), and the lack of flexibility in the schedule. The biggest waste of time, however, lies within the poor student behavior. Experts estimate that more than 50% of teaching time in public schools is spent on redirecting student behavior. RMCS’s positive discipline, our application process which screens out potentially disruptive students, and our low student-to-teacher ratio, provides a classroom setting that is not disruptive, so students can make the most of class time. Our low student-to-teacher ratio makes it possible for teachers to address even the smallest disruptive behavior before it has a chance to escalate. So even

though we have fewer student contact days, students are, arguably, spending more time on task than they would be in a public school. Collaboration takes time. We have all witnessed that the class time used for student class meetings, collaboration, and conflict resolution pays off. Kids are empowered and feel more motivated because they have ownership. Collaboration has the same effect on teachers (or any adult). The 180-day school year was designed out of the traditional “blue collar” teacher format, where teachers were immersed in a top-down bureaucracy. This blue collar format has been proven ineffective. It makes teachers too isolated from one another and they don’t feel like

professionals. By contrast, Rainbow teachers creatively brainstorm, plan, and work together as professionals should. RMCS teachers this year have clearly expressed that having more voice and time to work together has improved their performance and their positive feelings for the job. They know what is going on because they have time to communicate, and the information from the administration is transparent because we have time to share it. The time the faculty has had to collaborate is part of why the climate has been so positive at RMCS since last year. In particular, school-wide celebrations and events such as Water Day/Earth Day, monthly celebrations, artist-in-residences, or anything that requires two or more classrooms working together require an *extra* amount of collaboration time between teachers. These multi-age experiences are critical to our program.

The 180-day calendar is antiquated. When this calendar was “invented” teachers’ responsibilities were much simpler. Since then, the students have become much more complicated (English language learners, inclusive special education, etc), the training teachers need has dramatically increased, and their outside-the-classroom responsibilities (such as paper work) has increased *tremendously*, creating an untenable workload that takes the focus away from students, and leads to teacher burn out. As a result, every year, large numbers of teachers leave the profession, which has led to a national teacher shortage.

First-year teachers typically need to spend as much, or more, time planning and preparing as they do teaching.

Burn Out in public schools is very, very real – and it has a devastating effect on the children and their perception of school as negative. I hope you agree that our teachers last year were as excited about teaching at the end of the year as they were at the beginning.

Parent conferences. Eight of the “off” days in our calendar are conference days. In Asheville public schools parents get to conference with their teacher only twice a year for about 15 minutes. Our teachers meet with parents four times a year, usually for 30 minutes each time, or more in some cases. If we were to eliminate Listening Conferences in September, the November Parent Conferences, the Student-Led Conferences in March, or the End of Year Summary, our program wouldn’t be complete. In addition, RMCS teachers don’t simply provide a report card with letter grades, they also spend time writing detailed narratives about each child.

In addition to parent conferences, for those of you who have had students in the public school system, I’m sure it’s noticeable how much more accessible our teachers make themselves. The casual and caring informal talks teachers have with parents every day are a part of their overall work hours.

Fewer weather days. I don’t think RMCS has ever had more than three closings in one year due to weather, and we almost never have late starts, in comparison to the public schools who frequently close or start late due to inclement winter weather. Although our training days inconvenience parents, at least parents have time to plan alternatives. Weather days happen suddenly, making parents scramble for sitters.

Of course, the obvious question is, “Can’t we have quality AND quantity?” If our teachers were to spend as much time training and collaborating as they currently do AND have 180 student contact days, they would be working 206 days of the year, which is *more* than public school teachers. Not only would this create inevitable burnout, but I feel salaries would have to at least match that of public school teachers, which would require at

least a 20% tuition increase. This year we raised salaries to match, or pay more, than most private schools in the area, but our teacher salaries are still *significantly* lower than public school teacher salaries. Teachers accept lower salaries at RMCS because they want to work here.

Finally, while we are here to support families, our primary job is to educate children, *not* to provide child care. Some parents need five day school weeks for child care. Since our preschool is a child care facility, they have fewer teacher training days. The k–8 program, however, is not a child care program, but a high quality educational program. It’s more important that we design an exceptional educational program, than to provide as many child care days as possible. We certainly don’t want the latter infringing on the former.

In summary, the 160-day calendar helps our teachers accomplish peak performance. When we have great teachers who are doing a great job, we have a strong school. When I was interviewing for the executive director position at Rainbow, I expressed that forming the teachers into a functioning, fulfilled team was my number one priority – something we all knew our school would benefit from. Within one year – by adding only four more teacher training days than the previous year – this goal has been accomplished. Our teachers collaborate, they communicate, they are well-trained, and they are happy. Their happiness rubs off on our children.

As a parent, I can be two different people. When I am balanced and rested, I could be the “poster child” for positive discipline. But when I am worn out, it takes all of my self-control to be patient with my children because I feel cranky. I want our teachers to feel rested, prepared, grounded, and balanced each day so they are clearly *enjoying* our children. Holistic education is about living a holistic life – one that is balanced. Our calendar allows our teachers to model for their students a life that is healthy, balanced, and beautiful.♥

Our teachers collaborate and communicate; they are well-trained, & they are happy. Their happiness rubs off on our children.