



Give Special Area and Elective Teachers the Respect They Deserve

By Educator Barnes – April 23, 2019

"I get no respect." Rodney Dangerfield

This is my 13th year as an educator. I made it past the ominous five-year mark where a lot of teachers bite the dust. I crossed the decade line with only a few bumps and bruises. This school year, I met a new challenge, one I did not see coming, a lack of respect.

For the bulk of my teaching career, I was a middle school or high school English teacher. English/language arts is an important subject. You know the important ones are the ones we test, right? I have also been an English language learner teacher and a literacy coach. Although those roles brought their unique challenges, I was still seen as a competent and knowledgeable educator. This year, after my previous instructional coaching/teaching job was eliminated, I transitioned into the role of an elementary library/media specialist.

I was excited. I was the kid who would ask to go to the water fountain in elementary school just to sneak into the library and read a book. (Yes, I eventually got caught.) I'm an avid reader; I read almost every day. My English students used to joke that I secretly returned to school at night to read. Being in a library all day felt like a good fit. I was initially welcomed with opened arms, and then I learned how people really feel about the special area/elective teachers: we aren't respected at the same level as other certified teaching staff. I've seen this treatment in other schools, but it is different to be the receiver of this treatment.

Prep Time

I know many teachers will tell you how the administration hijacks their prep, and I agree this is true. Some schools don't even bother giving special area/elective teachers the same amount of prep. Currently, my prep is 15 minutes shorter than other certified staff members, and the 30 minutes I do get really isn't 30 minutes.

My prep is how I start my day, but before prep, I have car rider duty. It ends at 7:30 AM which is the same time my prep begins. Moreover, I can't walk inside at 7:30 AM because we let cars in until that bell rings, so kids are always unloading after 7:30 AM. This means I get to my office at 7:35 AM.

Then, my prep is interrupted by morning announcements. Yes, I can work through them, but I need to half-way listen because the morning announcements can have information for both students and staff. That's another two minutes gone.

Last, I need to wrap up what I am doing in my office so I'm at the door when my prep ends at 8:00 AM which is the same time my first class arrives. At a minimum, that is another minute.

If you were keeping track, my 30-minute prep is actually about 23 minutes of uninterrupted work time four days a week. Elementary classroom teachers have to plan for multiple subjects and special area teachers have to plan for multiple grades. At the end of the day, we are all

creating multiple lesson plans, so we should have the same amount of time to plan. This is the shortest prep I have ever had in my career, but I'm not putting in less work.

Yes, we all have time to work between the end of the school day and the time our contract ends. But if you have ever been at a school at that time, teachers are typically moving about the building connecting with other colleagues to get tasks done that they can't complete when they have students. If you were wondering why we only have four days of prep, one of those days is reserved for PLCs. Speaking of PLCs...

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

If you want to know how much you are valued as a teacher, it can be noted in how much interest administration takes in your development. As a literacy coach, I led PLCs for three school years. A good PLC is where data is analyzed, teachers are learning new skills, and good lesson plans are created or revised for reteaching. PLCs typically involves administrator input they share as the PLC is happening...but administrators actually have to show up to do that.

When I was a literacy coach, a music teacher reached out to me for help. When this teacher was hired, to replace the last teacher that quit, other teachers voted this teacher wouldn't make it through the school year. (You know the teacher turn over is bad or expected when teachers are placing bets on who is going to bite the dust.) This teacher was attending PLCs but wasn't getting the help needed to create an engaging lesson plan and improve classroom management, so the teacher reached out to me, the literacy coach. I offered advice and resources, but alas, my colleagues were right. The teacher left before the school year ended.

There are specific skills and interests I would like to develop in my current role, but PLCs, which should be a springboard at least, is not the place where most special area/elective teachers find help. We typically seek out knowledge and develop ourselves on our own. We are always an afterthought.

Other Colleagues

"It's not like you are giving grades Mrs. Barnes." Yes, it is true that I don't give grades (which is not the case for all special area/elective teachers) but I still have to create lesson plans, and I'm still expected to teach. It seems that people don't care about that.

I'll be the first to admit I am guilty of this. When I was teaching English, and I knew a student had gym or art after my class, I had no problem keeping the student after to have a conversation or complete work. I never stopped to consider how my self-centeredness affected my colleagues. Even when they would send an email to express concern, I would send a polite apology and not give their words a second thought. I have given those emails a second thought now.

I have classes arrive ten minutes late. That might not seem like a big deal but I only have 45 minutes and students have to check out a book during that time in addition to participating in my lesson. Earlier this month, I had a class picked up ten minutes late which means I had that class plus the next class at the same time. No, this doesn't happen much, but it has happened more than twice. At least at the secondary level, we have bells to keep people relatively on time. Even if it is not 10 minutes late, a few minutes late can still be problematic because each class is a different grade level which means I have to change my slides and get prepared.

The other annoyance is that people brush off that you are teaching. Throughout my career, I have heard complaints from the special area/elective teachers about getting bombarded with requests and interruptions while they are teaching.

"Can we borrow a ball for a game we are going to play?"

"Can we have some art supplies for this project?"

"Can you pull these books for my students? I need them today."

I'm sure if I interrupted your math time to ask if you pull some supplies right now for me to borrow, it would not be appreciated. We are trained in our specialty, a specialty that a student may pursue a related career. We should be treated the same as other certified staff.

What can be done?

Administrators have to take as much time addressing the needs and concerns of special area/elective teachers as they do other certified staff. Administration sets the tone. If the administration does not seem to care, why would other staff members? This means providing targeted professional development.

Special area/elective teachers should not have to sit through professional development that does not apply to them. If the principal does understand this and excuses these teachers, does

the principal provide alternative development in place of the training other certified teachers are receiving?

Special area/elective teachers also need to be considered in regards to school resources and supports. There's nothing worse than to hear the school has purchased supplies, but then you find out it is only for core subject area teachers or classroom teachers. If you are in elementary school, you have everyone in the school and in secondary, you can have half of the school or more. We don't get to give out a supply list for items like tissue and pencils, so the least a school could do is not exclude us when they are purchasing these types of supplies for everyone else.

Also, give special area/elective teachers a voice. Ask them what they need and try to implement or offer it. There is nothing worse than an administrator that says he or she has an open door policy and then you find out it is only to hear concerns not actually to work to fix and address those concerns.

I don't regret taking this role, but I don't like feeling like I'm not a real teacher. I know my self-worth and my skill set, but it is also good to feel like others appreciate what you have to offer.