

An Inspirational Message from Cecelia Sizoo-Roberson

2021 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Southwest Region Teacher of the Year

As I write, a fresh blanket of snow is falling across our state. Through the mountains, piedmont and coastal plains, our students in grades Pre-K to 12th are waiting anxiously to race outside for snowball fights and sled runs. They are getting the all too rare opportunity to be exactly what they are- kids. Our students face countless, sometimes bordering impossible, expectations as participants in the education system, all while also dealing with the unjust realities many face as members of American society. In my ten years as a North Carolina educator, I have seen many responsibilities and forms of assessment added in response to those realities, but very few taken away. As teachers, we support our students as we work tirelessly together to attempt to avoid falling short of any of these expectations. When our students experience failures and compounding challenges along the way we say, “kids are resilient” pushing forward because the expectations remain. However, we are not addressing the hurt building in their hearts and minds along the way.



Our love for our students and our desires for them to be successful with everything thrown their way has created the need for what I call unreasonable resilience. This phenomenon happens systemically and within our four classroom walls. We see its ripple effects in the rising mental health crisis in teens and in growing student disengagement with school. In 2020, the stability of school crashed in around us, leaving us all grappling. We quickly built a new system and threw our students right in. Students and teachers struggled, all the while hearing reminders that they could do anything they set their minds to and that everything would be fine. Many of our students experienced frustration, challenge and failure throughout virtual learning but continued to be unreasonably resilient in this unfamiliar system. Students spent an entire year hearing “this year is unlike any other” but state testing rolled around in May to assess their performance in the exact same way. Many students received results unlike any they have experienced before while others received yet another mark of failure. All are still trying to reconcile these results while displaying unreasonable resilience as business pushes on as usual.

These moments of unreasonable resilience arise in classrooms each day. As educators, we have the influence to decide whether we push our students there or whether we engage differently. Imagine this: You pass back a quiz and a student who sometimes seems disengaged puts her head down. You move on to a warm-up. The student’s head is still down. You are frustrated recognizing that having one’s head down during instruction is what you think leads to low quiz grades in the first place. You draw attention to the student from the front of the room. The student reacts with anger. Now the student has a bad grade and is in trouble for a classroom outburst. Now imagine it from the other side. The student really struggled with this concept during virtual learning. She worked hard with you this unit, studied, did her homework and finally felt successful. The quiz you passed back says otherwise. The student is angry with herself for not doing well and spirals thinking about how she is terrible at this and everything else. She needs a second to breathe. Then, she hears you calling her name in front of 30 other people...

As teachers, we have small outlets for moments when unreasonable resilience is required of us. We can pace, pretend to draft an email, call for coverage, assign independent work, disengage momentarily. However, we too frequently deny students—children—this same grace. Even in their most vulnerable moments, we expect students to follow directions with respect and without question. As the snow begins to melt and we move into spring, we are bound to come across moments with students where we are tempted to respond with anger or indignation. I invite you to take a deep breath and consider the countless expectations weighing on children each day and the lack of outlets to process them. As adults, we owe children the same spaces to process their emotions that we give ourselves, rather than pushing them into spaces of unreasonable resilience. As we creep toward the close of the 2021-22 school year, let us always remember that the students who sit in our classrooms each day are children and should be treated as such. Should you forget, just look out the window and try to remember—they are the same children making snow angels in their front yards and shrieking with joy as they sled through the streets just weeks ago—children who deserve more than unreasonable resilience.



Save the Date: BT Twitter Chat
February 15, 2022
7- 8 pm #NCBTChat
Sign up for a text reminder: www.remind.com/join/ncbt2021



Get Ready for the 2022 NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey!

The NCTWC Survey is administered to every teacher and licensed school-based educator in our public schools every two years. For almost two decades, educators have been using NC Teacher Working Conditions Survey (NCTWC) results to drive decision-making in school and district improvements. In addition, our legislators and State Board of Education use data from the survey to help inform policy. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction will provide this anonymous, online teaching conditions survey from **March 1-31, 2022**. You will be receiving more information on participating and sharing your voice as a beginning teacher.