Alan Canestrari: What does teaching require these days?

Deborah Meier: First of all, any kind of teaching requires toughness. You have to have firm convictions about a whole lot of stuff that you are not, in fact, always so sure about. But, if a kid asks can he sharpen his pencil or go to the bathroom, you have to exercise a judgment pretty fast and firmly even if more than one good answer might make sense, or even be the right one. You have to be tough on yourself, so that at the end the day you’re left with a bunch of unanswered questions of the “Could I have . . . ?” or “Maybe next time . . . .” or even, “Did I just blow a great moment for . . . ?” And, you need to carve out of an exceedingly un leisurely profession, time to think . . . enough time to think about these sticky matters over time, realizing that all the odd living and reading you do can help you in finding the answers. And then, you need to be tough enough to stick to it.

Bruce Marlowe: Suppose your way of doing your work, exercising judgment—about those little things you mention like going to the bathroom or the big things about what’s worth teaching—is very different than your colleagues’ ways? Or very different from what the principal, school district, or state is invested in?

Meier: Now that’s tougher still. And, these days, that’s what many of us are struggling with—the plethora of external regulation about what our
work is and how we do it. But of course in fact with rare exceptions, those of us involved all our lives in public education have rarely been in situations where we have had to deal with anything less.

Today, though, we are witnessing something new. And there are some tough choices facing us in the teaching field as a result. After a decade or more of considerable “laissez-faire” between the mid 70s and the early 90s (it varied by locale) we’re witnessing a retightening of the screws—with more of the screws coming from higher and more remote places, in a setting in which technology makes it harder to hide. The culture of privacy has been ripped apart—for reasons both good and bad. Thus, the kind of quiet, behind-closed-doors resistance that flourished during my earliest teaching years is more problematic. Today, the standardized curriculums and lesson plans which were always part of the traditional public schools—even when ignored—are being republished and reissued, in even greater detail. The old regime has been reinstalled, plus.

Canestrari: So, what lessons would you offer new teachers?

Meier: Number one is: How to survive. It probably helps to remember that this is not new. The technology to enforce it [teacher compliance] is more brutal, but the intent is old and familiar. And, it has, unfortunately, been accepted by too many men and women of good will as a necessity if all children are to meet “high standards.”

When I first arrived in New York City there was a loosely enforced grade-by-grade curriculum, and fairly decent guides for carrying it out step-by-step. We survived in part by figuring out where we had space to deviate and where we didn’t. In Headstart I was told teaching the names of numbers, letters, and colors was what we’d be tested on in June; but I figured if we did modestly well at that I could spend 90 percent of my time exploring more important stuff like the properties of real life. I realized I never met a kid of 8 who didn’t know his colors—unless he was color blind and then drilling colors at age 4 was worse than useless. And the same would be true of the names of letters unless we persisted in teaching them to read formally too early and insisted that we use the names of the letters as a key way into such early instruction. Survival, in other words, depends on making some decisions about what’s important, and living by them—most of the time.

Canestrari: Can teachers be effective in changing their conditions?

Meier: Of course, once they learn to survive. The second strategy is to organize—join with others. It starts with being a good colleague in one’s
own schools. Not easy work. Another way is through teacher and staff organizations. The power of solidarity among working people is still, or once again, obviously vital. As fewer unions exist nationwide natural allies among other working people have lessened. But teacher unions also provide us with links to other organized working people.

But it's important to remember that it's not just joining with the teachers. For example, you may also be a parent. Don't hesitate to speak out in that role also, without feeling that somehow it's unfair or unwise. Not at all. We listen to what doctors say about the kind of medicine they want for their own kids. So you are doubly powerful in this dual role. But even if you decide to be just a parent in your child's school, be a loud one on behalf of the things you believe are good for all kids and teachers.

And then work, within both roles—as teacher and parent—for the strongest and loudest alliance between these two self-interested and powerful groups. If parents and teachers were truly able to use their strength in even a semi-united way, they'd overcome. But, we've allowed a rift to exist between us that serves others, but neither parents nor teacher. This is a time in history when we have to put the issues that unite us to the fore, and agree to disagree on others.

Then there's using your voice. I don't just mean your teacherly voice, but your broader professional voice. Find every way you can to hone your skills as a writer and speaker—to little audiences and big ones, letters to the editors included. And, not just on contentious reform issues. Speak out and write out as an expert on reading, or science, or classroom management, or children's aspirations. Insist on the idea that you are a theorist and an expert, not only a practitioner; don't make it easy to be seen as hardworking, dedicated, loving but a wee bit weak in the head and too prone to sentimentality, or likely to only see the faces in front of you, to miss the important systemic problems!

Then comes the last course of action. For those who can't find any of the above individual or group strategies feasible, and begin to find it hard to face themselves each morning in the mirror, it may be best to change schools, move to another less draconian locale, or even, dare I say it, quit teaching. There is other important work to be done in the world, including work on behalf of children. And, if and when you leave, don't miss the opportunity; don't go quietly and don't go blaming your former colleagues, families, or kids.

Marlowe: Any final advice for new teachers?

Meier: In each and every way that you work in the field, bring the best of yourself as a parent, citizen, and passionate learner into your work, and
put “getting along” in perspective. Getting along helps smooth the way, no mean goal, and it makes for more allies, and it makes your voice more effective. Assuming that your colleagues (like the families whose kids you teach) want similar things, acting out of their best intentions is the place to begin. But, watch out when getting along starts becoming a way of life, and other people’s good intentions begin to undermine your own. The “courage” you need is the courage to not excuse yourself too often for failing to do what needs doing, for pretending that bad practice—including your own—is good practice, or for seeing yourself and your colleagues as the enemy—or the victims. Victims don’t make good teachers—because above all we want our kids to see themselves as competent actors who have learned how to be competent citizens from teachers who saw themselves as that—citizens of their schools and communities.

Deborah Meier is the principal of the Mission Hill Elementary School in Boston, Massachusetts.