

Rather than a Solution, Charter Schools are an Opportunity for More Extensive **White Chalk Crime**

Firing Day at the Charter School

I just quit my job as a teacher in an urban charter school. Even though I still don't have another job and I support myself entirely, it is the best decision I ever made. It is especially liberating this week while my colleagues – and after five incredibly stressful years on the education front lines, my truly beloved friends – wait for the June 1 ax to fall.

Every June 1, the exhausted teachers and staff at my school learn whether they will be rehired for another grueling year. Last year the school gave 43 staff and teachers the you're-outta-luck-pal letters, including the entire three-man physical education department and the student support genius, Dany Edwards, who somehow made harmony out of the schools' cacophony of crazy student behavior. This year the school's three glorious new gymnasiums are largely unused because we have no gym teachers and Dany is dead of unknown causes. Whatever happened to this beautiful young man, firing him didn't help him live any better or happier for his last few months on earth. And the kids he championed lost his tender, tough, hilarious and real guidance.

This post is dedicated to you Dany, one year after you ran from the building in frantic disbelief, waving your letter as you ran up and down Hyde Park Avenue, looking for people to share your grief. If they can fire you, they can fire any of us. Except they can't fire me. I beat them at their game.

The first thing you need to know reader, is that there is no job security at a charter school. Even excellent veteran educators, like the three physical education teachers who were fired one year ago, are vulnerable. Between them these men gave something like 35 years to the school. They offered serious nutrition education in their fight against childhood obesity. They miraculously coached kids who have hair trigger tempers through team sports without break-out fights. They taught the kids good sportsmanship and how to represent themselves, their families and the school during games at other schools. They taught yoga, which the kids actually used to calm themselves in class. And they worked the kids hard. Oh how I miss seeing the kids come to class from gym all red and sweaty and happy. This gymless year, the kids seem fatter and more out of breath as they huff and puff their way to the third floor.

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Dany "Devs" Edwards. Image by Sean Flaherty.

To you Michelle Rhee and all you anti-union fanatics, you are wasting your time waiting around for superman. They already fired superman at my school. You see a union would have protected Dany as well as these three talented teachers who provided quality physical education to all of our 1200 students. Meanwhile, some not-so-gifted staff and teachers get to keep their jobs every June 1. At least public schools and their unions have transparent

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guidelines for tenure and enough respect to let teachers know they won't be rehired for the next school year by March or earlier. June 1 is late to jump into the teacher hiring season. I suspect the administration keeps it a secret to the bitter end because they don't trust us to keep working hard. They are suspicious and we are paranoid. It's part of my school's culture.

The second thing to know is that we work very hard at my charter school, completing endless tasks that are not designed to instill habits of critical thinking in our students. Rather we are driven like cattle to collect mounds of data, to divvy the data up into tidy and irrelevant skill categories, and finally to create individual action plans to remediate each student's poor data points. We are required to write lesson plans that note exactly which discreet skills we will be working on during every minute of every school day while delivering scripted programs. It takes hours to make these plans and we don't use them. Can't use them. Because kids are unpredictable and surprises happen. Most of us work at least ten hours on every weekday preparing our rooms and teaching. We continue working on weekends. The building is open on Saturdays and during vacations and there are a lot of cars in the parking lot on these days off.

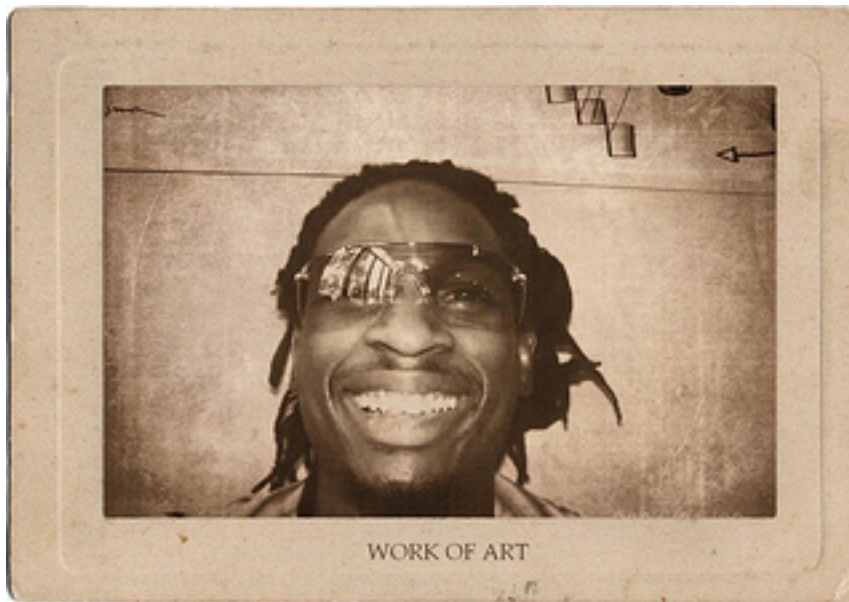
This heavy workload doesn't even take into account the trauma and anguish of working with urban children who suffer all the indignities of poverty. One day last week I had to file three mental health emergencies for neglect – two for kids who reeked of urine and one for a boy who was wobbly with hunger. One of our school psychologists once explained that many of our students come to school afraid and then stay afraid all day, afraid that their home or family may not be there when they get off the bus. These are the kids who constantly disrupt the classrooms. If Dany had been allowed to continue his ministerial work, he would still be providing discipline, safety and love for these broken children. And he would be giving us teachers rock solid support without judgement in our struggle to keep these kids learning. The school psychologist said she prayed for the students' safety every night. In case you are wondering, she quit before they got a chance to fire her.

Our workload is a favorite theme of the school's superintendent and CEO. Charter school leaders love these business style titles. Dr. CEO often chuckles during all-staff meetings at how we charter school teachers work harder than they do in Boston Public Schools and get paid less for our troubles. Apparently he doesn't know how insulting this is. Last December a group of administrators entertained us during a holiday party with a

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school version of 'Twas the Night Before Christmas that included a verse about how little we get paid for our hefty workload. That was the last time I worked a ten-hour day and the moment I knew I had to quit.

The third and last thing for you to know is that psychological torture precedes the June 1 firing ritual in the form of annual performance reviews. It looks like our new principal has brought this final blow to a new level. I've talked to many teachers and they report the same experience. He begins the review with gracious smiles and copious thank-yous for our commitment and hard work. And then he trashes our performance. So many of us have "failed to meet professional standards," you would think the school could barely function. Teachers are leaving their performance reviews convinced their June 1 letter will be very bad news. They have to sweat it out to June 1.



Dany Edwards. Image by Sean Flaherty.

The most disturbing part is that the principal already knows who will be rehired. And he knows which teachers have especially compelling reasons to stay one more year. But he keeps them guessing. He doesn't even give them a reassuring wink or a thumbs up. Just a fake thank you. Another administrator asked me last week if people were freaking out, and then changed our plans for getting a drink after work on June 1. "I don't want be out when people are all upset about losing their jobs."

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This week it feels like the school's windows have been draped with heavy black curtains and the florescent ceiling lights are flickering. The kids are more difficult than ever and we don't have Dany to let the sunlight in. No matter what happens Dany, I will never work in another charter school. That's the least I could do.

Editor's Note: The author of this post was terminated immediately and escorted out of the public charter school on the morning of June 4th, 2012. Although she had already given notice of her resignation, she wasn't allowed to finish out the school year with her students and colleagues as is the school's customary practice.