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Interview with Paul Gray: 2008 Arkansas Teacher of the Year

Sarah C. McKenzie
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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The Arkansas Teacher of the Year (ATOY) Awards Program, co-sponsored by the ADE and the State Board of Education, focuses public attention on excellence in classroom teaching. In fact, Act 17 from the 2006 Legislative Special Session requires that the State Board of Education recognize annually an Arkansas teacher of the year, and allows each school district to submit an applicant.

To be considered for this award, applicants must initially describe their educational history and professional development, teaching philosophies, and educational gains in their classroom, among other things. Teachers also must submit three letters of support. The applicants are then reduced to 16, one from each of the 15 Regional Educational Service Cooperative and one from Pulaski County. The regional finalists receive \$1,000 and four are selected as the state semi-finalists. A selection panel visits each teacher's classroom prior to naming the ATOY.

The ATOY recipient is placed on administrative paid leave for one year while working as a consultant to the ADE. The "Work-In-Residence" serves a dual purpose: the ATOY gains professional development through the experience, while serving as a consultant to the ADE by providing technical assistance to administrators, teachers, and students. In addition, the ATOY serves as an ambassador for education in the state, making public appearances across Arkansas. The ATOY also attends State Board of Education meetings as a non-voting member to represent educators. Lastly, each ATOY is nominated to represent the state of Arkansas in the National Teacher of the Year Program.

The 2008 Arkansas Teacher of the Year was Paul Gray of Russellville. Mr. Gray is a social studies teacher and department chairman at Russellville High School.

After completing his year with the ADE, Mr. Gray took the time to interview with us. We inquired

about his experiences leading up to the award, his philosophy of teaching, his role as a consultant with the ADE during his one-year sabbatical, and his thoughts about how to further improve education in the state of Arkansas.



2008 Arkansas Teacher of the Year poses for a photo with President George W. Bush. White House photo by Joyce Boghosian

What made you choose the teaching profession?

Paul Gray: I came from a family of teachers. My grandmother was a teacher and my father was a teacher. I knew I wanted to teach. I also believe that teaching is a calling. I firmly believe that teaching found me. Plus, I love kids (especially teenagers) and I wanted to work with them. I am sort of a big kid myself and I have a good time in the classroom. When I think about teaching a lesson, I ask myself how bored I would be if I had to learn this lesson. I figure if I would be bored, then I know the kids will be bored. So, I always try to find ways to make learning as fun as possible.

What are your favorite aspects about teaching?

Paul Gray: Of course, I love the interaction with kids. I love the energy in a classroom. And, I really like learning from the students. They teach me so much. But to have positive interaction with kids a teacher must establish a relationship with them. Good teachers have to learn as much as they can about every student they have. That means doing a lot of talking to kids about what they like and don't like. A good teacher has to find out what interests, hobbies, musical instruments or sports they play. A good teacher must find out who their friends are, what books they read, if they read at all, what movies they liked and so on. Plus, teachers need to do some research on each student. What is their family situation like? Where do they live? What can the counselors tell me about my students? What can other teachers tell me about my students? The list goes on. It is absolutely critical for teachers to show these kids that we care about them as people. Once we find out what that student is about, then we can begin to find ways to teach them effectively. Test scores, grades and any other data we have about our students will not matter unless we can effectively and consistently find ways to deliver instruction and develop skills. "Reluctant learners" will never become just "learners" unless we can reach them. As my friend George Goodfellow, the 2008 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year says: "Wrap the student around the curriculum, not the curriculum around the student." What George is saying is that too many times we try to force a "round curriculum" into a "square student." That may work with some students. But, for the students we really need to reach – this will never work. It takes a highly trained, committed teacher to see how they can teach the curriculum to that student. Now, this is no small task. In fact, it could be about the hardest thing there is to do effectively in the world. But, that is our charge.

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What have you learned as a result of your sabbatical/consultant work with the ADE?

Paul Gray: I am not sure where to start on this one. I have learned so much during my sabbatical year. I like to tell people that I have gotten a "bird's eye view" of education in the last year. Sitting on the Arkansas Board of Education has been an exceptional experience. I have learned a great deal about educational policy and political issues. Specifically, I have a better understanding of issues such as charter schools, education law, school finance, teacher quality, licensure, curriculum, standards review and compliance to name only a few.

I was also able to do a research project during the year. I talked to kids in about 25 elementary, middle, junior and high schools. I asked to speak with kids who were failing or not doing well at all. Teachers, counselors and principals in schools chose students who fit the profile for which I was looking. I talked to almost 100 students between November 2008 and April 2009. I learned so much about the students and the issues which affect them, as well as their lack of performance in schools. Most of the problems these students faced were external. I don't think this is too much of a surprise to educators or schools. That is, most of the causes of their problems are poverty, low expectations, parental issues, physical/sexual abuse and countless others. In fact, one of the principals of the schools I visited said, "If I could build a dormitory and keep some of these kids here and could feed them, supervise them and love them – well we wouldn't have nearly as many kids failing in my school."

I learned a great deal about these kids' lives and how it affects their learning. But, it was how I can apply and reapply these lessons to my teaching each day. For example, many of these students talked about discipline problems in school. Many of these kids get into trouble because they are trying to mask the lack of skills, confidence or just not knowing how to get along in school. Many students told me that they knew when a teacher didn't like them or at the least – didn't really care about them one way or another. They said they tended to get in trouble in classes where the teachers would overreact (the

students' own words) to something they did in class. Students said teachers would raise the level of intensity over something as benign as talking in class. The students said they had to equal that intensity, and therefore causing more tension. Eventually, the student winds up in the office over something that probably shouldn't have ever happened. In fact, one 15-year-old who described a situation like the previous one said, "Who's the adult?" I really had to sit back and think about this. How many times do teachers (including myself) get caught up in a situation like this? These kids are, many times, trying to mask their shortcomings. Or, they are simply reacting to the norms of their family in resolving conflict (we all must read or re-read Ruby Payne's book on poverty). These kids feel they must "save face" in these kinds of conflicts. Teachers and administrators have to remember that (most of the time) these kids are not taking this too personally. They don't go home and think about what happened. But, teachers take these stressful situations home with them for sure. We need to remember: These are kids; keep things in perspective; get to know students personally so we can prevent problems; realize that we may have to not only give kids from poverty or unfortunate home circumstances a second chance - but third, fourth or fifth chances; talk with our colleagues, especially counselors and be flexible.

Finally, I learned that if we want to know what our kids think about us, our school, our rules, our systems or anything else – just ask them. Give the kids a safe place and permission to talk seriously with us about what they need or how we can improve our school, instruction, courses, rules or any other issue. I think we bring in the "good kids" all the time when we need help. We need to be more inclusive and sensitive with what the so-called "other kids" need. Their voice is most likely the most important voice in the school. They are also the least-heard voices in our schools.

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What types of changes would you advocate in Arkansas if you were appointed as the new Commissioner of Education?

Paul Gray: I will not pretend to be qualified to be the Arkansas Commissioner of Education. But, if I was sought out to be an advisor to the next Commissioner, I might offer a few ideas.

1. I would propose the passage of a "Teachers at the Table Act" in the Legislature. This legislation would establish a committee of outstanding classroom teachers (former ATOYs, Milken winners, nominated teachers, etc.) who would review and offer input to proposed legislation being considered by the House or Senate.

I believe this could help better the legislation which is written. First, it is classroom teachers who ultimately must carry out policies passed by the Legislature. Many times, experienced teachers can anticipate the outcomes of a policy or offer suggestions for improvement. Second, classroom teachers are not on the minds of most folks writing policy. Sure, there is an organization or two who represent teachers lobbying for input. But, there are a plethora of education administrative and policy lobbies who are influencing how laws are written. Teachers really need to be "at the table" to help construct good laws.

2. I would allow schools, administrators and especially teachers, more access to curriculum decisions. The current process is very much a "top-down" approach. Everyone needs to understand that outstanding teachers attend national conferences and sit on national curriculum-writing committees. Many times these teachers are not consulted as new standards and curriculum decisions are made. Or, if they are consulted, there is a perception that curriculum decisions have already been made at the State level. I would try to have a system in place where all stakeholders have an opportunity to help make decisions about curriculum, course approvals and standards. The more open these processes are – the better.

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3. I do not have the answer to my next suggestion. And, I think we are starting to make progress in Arkansas on the issue of measuring good schools and good teachers.

First, please understand that I think we must use data, and schools must be held accountable. Any good educator wants to use data and wants to be accountable. We all want to improve our students, our schools and our teaching. But, I am not sure what we are measuring sometimes. Have we ever asked ourselves what our cut-off scores really mean? We are teaching to a set of "measureable" goals. But, I am not sure some of our goals really measure learning that needs to be learned. The bottom line is that no one can "measure" everything about human learning in multiple choice and short essay tests. Most of the ways we test involve two things: 1. ease of scoring to create data, and 2. using these data to make decisions about what is good teaching or not. Again, I still don't have the solution. But, just because it can be measured doesn't make it certain when one is talking about human learning. Some of the most creative lessons with the truest learning cannot be measured in mass-produced test. It takes hands-on teachers in the classroom to see and measure these results. And, every kid learns differently. So, standardized exams indeed shut out some kids from showing what they can really do.

We must find better ways to measure good schools and teachers. The focus over the last 8 years or so has been mostly test scores. Test scores are very important and offer good feedback to schools, administrators and teachers. But, the focus on test scores has put us in a game of "gotcha." Schools have gone into a "bunker mentality" in an effort to survive. For example, many schools in the past few years have focused on those students who were "almost proficient" on the last benchmark test. While focusing on these borderline students is good, it potentially causes schools to pay less attention to

those students who may have a poorer chance of being proficient on the next exam. This is an example of schools trying to "stay out of trouble or get out of trouble" instead of focusing on teaching all of our kids. Arkansas has started a system which addresses this problem. But, we still have a long way to go.

Again, I don't have an answer yet on how we solve this problem. I just know that testing is not the only measure of a good school or teacher. We are dealing with human beings – human beings who come from diverse backgrounds with diverse abilities. And, these human beings are still developing. We must remember that schools do not control all of the things which happen to these kids before they come to school or after they go home. It is a complicated process.

We gladly take every student who comes to our doors. It becomes our job to educate them the best we can. Schools need every support system available to do this critical job. Literally, our state and country depend on it.

To view past Teachers of the Year or more information about the Arkansas Teacher of the Year Program, visit:
http://arkansased.org/teachers/recognition_toy.html

2009	Susan Waggener West Memphis High School, West Memphis
2008	Paul Gray Russellville High School, Russellville
2007	Justin Minkel Harvey Jones Elementary School, Springdale
2006	Marsha Petty Arkansas High School, Texarkana
2005	Pamela England Forrest City Junior School, Forrest City
2004	Donna Adkins Louisa E. Perritt Primary School, Arkadelphia
2003	Katherine Wright Knight Parkview Arts/Science Magnet HS, Little Rock