

SEPTEMBER 2010

How to make grade level curriculum
available to all students

Healthy students, healthy staff

NJEA Convention—come on down!

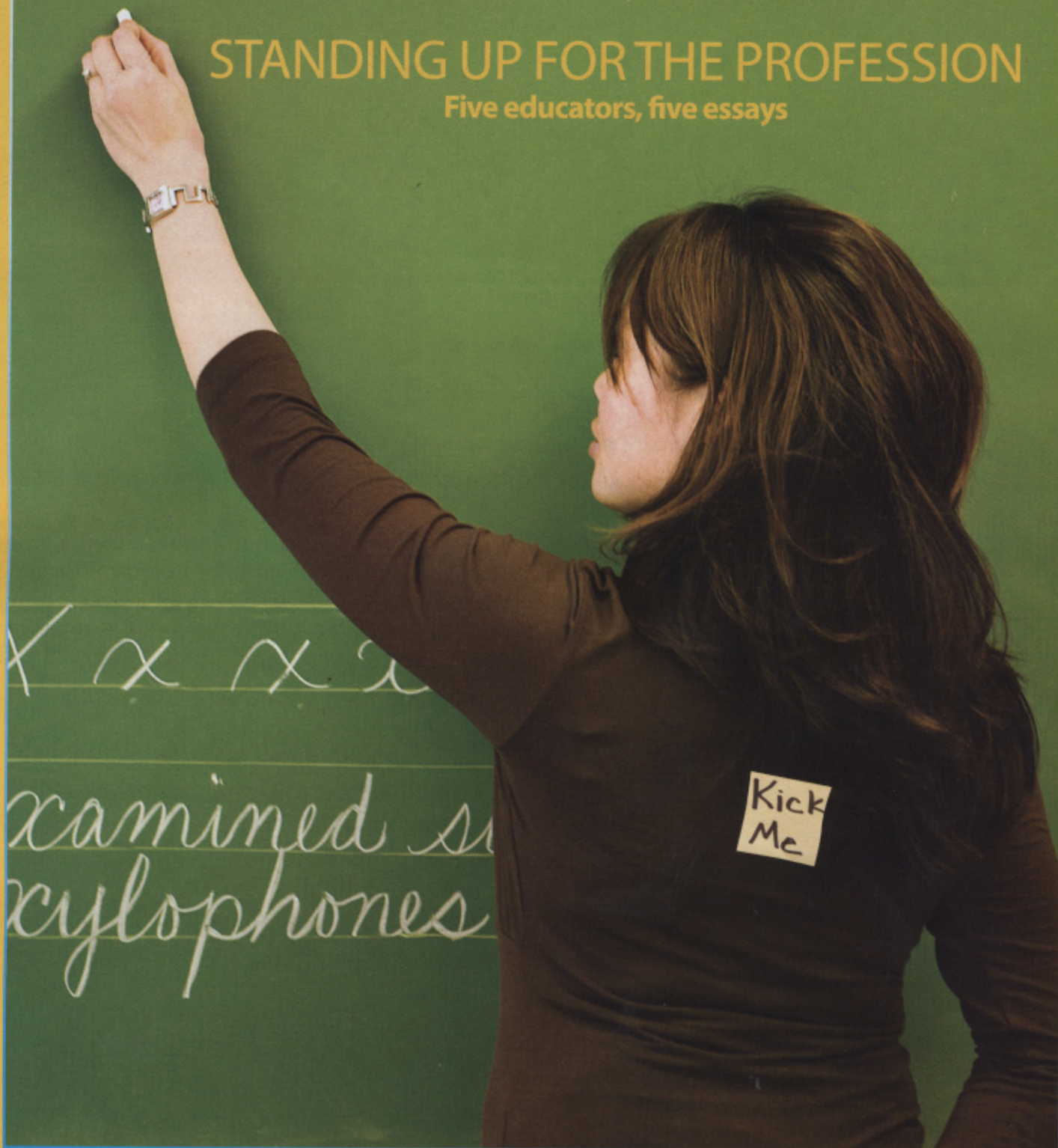
Tech savvy tools to start the school year

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Review

STANDING UP FOR THE PROFESSION

Five educators, five essays



A view from Camden's public schools

Jamal Dickerson



Fifteen years ago, I graduated from Camden's public schools; today I'm teaching music at Camden's Creative Arts High School and my wife and I are raising our six children here.

After high school, I left the state to attend college at Morgan State University in Maryland. When I graduated, my college mentors encouraged me to stay and teach in Maryland. But I was really set on coming back to Camden and being a positive role model for the students of Camden City Public Schools. They have so many negative role models and I wanted to combat that.

Even though Maryland offered me financial incentives to stay and teach in the state, including money towards a down payment on a house, I felt obligated to be part of the solution for Camden. I always knew I would come home to this city.

In the same dangerous neighborhoods where my students live, my wife and I are raising our six children. With so few examples of a strong, whole family, I want to be a picture of success for my students. Academically and personally, I want them to see what's possible. I want them to build on the life I'm making here so they can go even farther and eventually have healthy relationships of their own.

Recently we started looking for a larger home. We could have gotten something in the suburbs with a pool or a lot more property, but

we still want to be in Camden. So we are refurbishing a home (see photo on Page 15). Like the city in which we live, this house needs a lot of care and skill to bring it back to what it once was. Since I'm financing our home improvements on a teacher's salary, a lot of people are pitching in to help me. They see the value in improving this house and in having a family there. One of our new neighbors has even offered to purchase all the drywall I'll need for one room. In addition, I have friends, family members, neighbors, and even students helping with the house.

A lot of people think they know how to "fix" Camden, but no one is really asking us—the people who work here, live here, and are raising our families here—what we think this city needs.

Like my house, Camden needs people willing to stick around for the long haul. You can't rebuild our city or our schools with temporary employees who aren't invested in our students and our community. And when people focus on teachers as the problem, they're missing the infrastructure issues that have plagued our schools for decades. Everyone who works in Camden knows about the shortcomings of some of the teachers. But no matter where you work, you're going to find that dynamic. So many of our

teachers have made Camden's schools their life. They think about their students before school, after school, and over the summer. They're trying to puzzle out their students' needs and how to deliver the right tools to help them learn.

I try to take a special interest in each child and connect with the student's life. What does that child need and how do I get it for them? I take time to work with individual students and their families and in the evenings, I work at the Unity Community Center. I truly believe that our families and our neighborhoods have to be an integral part of the learning process for our students – and that's true no matter where you live.

You need administrative support in order to teach in this way. You can't be hampered by a rigid curriculum where you have to be on the same page on the same day as every other teacher in the district. State-level support is just as important. As teachers, we cannot be slaves to mandates and still be effective. Those mandates trickle down to administrators to teachers and then on to students. They have a chilling effect on real learning and developing a passion for a subject – any subject. As a music teacher, I'm fortunate not to have the emphasis on testing that math, science, and English teachers have to face.

As for the emphasis on standardized testing, I haven't been convinced of its true purpose or real value in education. I'm not convinced that it can truly measure what a child can learn or what a child knows.

My own story is proof of that. My SAT scores were not high enough to get into college but my college took me on probation because my grades were good. In my first semester, I had a 3.8 GPA and just this May I completed a master's degree. If I had been judged solely on standardized tests such as the SAT, I wouldn't be where I am today.

As someone who grew up in Camden, I'm conscious of the impact that appearances can have on my students. In this community, it looks like the people getting rewarded are the ones chasing the negative things in life. My students look at their teachers driving broken-down cars to work and wearing unstylish clothes. Then they look at the drug dealers who have nice cars and nice clothes and those students draw conclusions from that.

It's not enough to tell students not to value those things because those are the things people value in most communities. So I try to dress nicely and drive a nicer car – not because those things are necessarily important to me, but because I'm trying to be a viable alternative for my students. I want them to know that you can choose education and still be successful in the ways that matter to them.

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I don't recommend living in the community for every teacher. Even teachers who don't live in our community can have – and do have – a powerful impact on their students. It works for me – it's where I think I can be most effective.

There's beauty in this city, and I want to illuminate that. By teaching here and living here, I'm fighting to preserve that beauty.



Jamal Dickerson teaches music at Creative Arts High School in Camden. He attended Camden City Schools and returned to teach in them. In 2008, he won a Milken Foundation National Teacher Award.



Woods-Murphy, Williams, Goodman, and Dickerson have all been featured on a segment of "Classroom Close-up, NJ." To view these videos, go to njea.org and click on "About" and then "Classroom Close-up." Go to "Take a look" to search the Classroom Close-up Video Library by category, season, or location.