

September 22, 2011

To the people of Vancouver:

It will be Thanksgiving in a few weeks. Time to reflect on what we are thankful for: our families, our health, our people, and our experiences.

In my classroom each week we pass a gratitude stone and students share what they are grateful for. Sometimes answers are unexpected but certain things come up again and again. "I am grateful for my teacher." "I am grateful I go to school." "I am grateful for my friends." ". . . for my family" ". . . that I have a house." etc. Nothing unusual it seems. Personally, I find myself grateful each time for a group of children that emphasize these important things they value and never mention material items. It says something. Definitely it speaks to our discussions and studies at school. It speaks to their families and experiences. It also reflects their place in the world. My students live in the inner city. They don't have a lot. Some are grateful for a house because last year they were homeless. Some value school because it is the place of comfort - of daily breakfast, of hot lunch, of abundant books, adults who care and if they are lucky, clothes and toys passed on when they need them.

We are an amazing community at my school. We try to meet every need we can. We have some incredible partners in the community that contribute in countless ways to enrich the lives of our students. I would hate to start a list for fear of leaving someone off it, so I will show my appreciation in this way. Through time, through music, through holiday hampers, through books, through performances, through mentorship, through tutoring, through food, through so much more, many individuals, organizations, and

businesses contribute. I am endlessly in awe of the generosity and in no way want to take away from it, but I have to say it is not enough. I have worked in this community for 16 years. It is not enough.

I am a teacher and I am passionate about learning. In my classroom learning happens. It is celebrated. It is valued. But needing happens too. Often when a child is upset I ask this question: "What do you need?" When I assume, I can be wrong. When I ask, I am often surprised at the answers I get. Asking and listening allows me to know where to start.

Nobody ever asks me what I need. But here is my answer. In these first few weeks of school this year, this is what I have needed:

- Snacks. Recess snacks. Snacks for children who arrived late and missed breakfast. We have had donations and thank goodness. But I have many hungry kids and the stash in my file cabinet won't last.
- Socks. Warm, dry and the proper size. I have many sockless kids. The rains are coming. This just isn't okay.
- Boy's shoes size 3 or 4 because a pair that come to my class every day have holes. Girls size 13 - 2 because more than a few of us need them.
- A counselor for my cloakroom. Because we have had tears in there and we are working through stuff but in the middle of math it is hard to address sadness that just overwhelms you suddenly. Overwhelms you at age seven or eight. Our school has one counselor that comes for part of one day each week. She is there less than 4 days a month. She serves a school that is situated in the downtown eastside. We are not about a student number = counselor time ratio. We have bigger needs. Plain and simple.

- Advocates. Lots of them. Because some of us have ministry designations that are supposed to bring "in class" support and this support has been cut. Again.
- Affordable, safe housing. Some of us don't go home to a home but to a shelter or a relative's couch.

My list isn't finished, but I'll end it here. I think you get the idea.

True, not all of us have these needs. But some of us do and that's the problem.

What do I think? I think we have to all think seriously about how we feel about the fact that *our* child may go to school everyday with a packed lunch, a warm jacket and few worries and other children in this city do not. They come to my school and other schools across the city hungry, stressed and cold. In Vancouver. Where you live.

Think about what you vote for, speak for, and speak up against. Are you willing to put your time and/or your money towards affecting change? Will you advocate for a child that is not your own?

What are your ideas? What can you do? When?

We will not say no to another box of clothes or toys or granola bars because yes, we can use them. But understand we have a very important job - teaching these children in front of us each day. Personally, I am exhausted by the other things I do - coordinating, organizing, distributing to try and stay just 3 steps behind the need (I am never ahead) and not let it run away from me completely. If you can help, also give some thought to how

that helping will look. Play it out to the end. Own it. Take it on. It is so important.

Because from where I sit everyday, things are not okay. I can teach these children. Love them. Advocate for them. Find them clothes. Stock my room with great books. Give away parts of my lunch. Find donations. Find volunteers. I can be there everyday. Be reliable. I can connect. I can build community partnerships. I can build relationships with families. I can watch others around me doing the same. But until I know you are helping too - it will remain not good enough.

When you think about all those things you are grateful for, please get inspired. To be caring. To be generous. To make change. Because every child in Vancouver matters.

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