

ERIN SPONAUGLE

In education, accountability is not measured by test scores

Editor's note: On June 19, West Virginia Teacher of the Year Erin Sponaugle delivered an EDTalk address at American Public University in Charles Town as part of the second in the EDTalk speaker series, along with APUS CEO Wallace Boston and U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin. The EDTalk speaker series is sponsored by the Education Alliance and are designed to promote and generate discussion and ideas about engaging business and education on the subject of public education in West Virginia. Excerpts of Sponaugle's speech are printed below with her permission.

I view the issues, the current events, the foundations that are the structure for our economy and education, through the eyes of a teacher. I've been with West Virginia every step of the way this year — from frigid, inclement weather that had me dodging snowstorms faster than a speeding snowflake, to being humbly reminded that you needn't be in a third-world country to not have clean, safe drinking water. My perspectives and views on education have changed, evolved almost daily with every teacher, student that I meet across the state.

I want to take a minute to share with you a small glimpse into my classroom, because as I travel and speak this year, I miss it terribly. Fifth-graders — almost to middle school. There are a lot of emotional and intellectual changes that go on the lives of 10- and 11-year-olds on the cusp of adolescence. They know much about the world around them — perhaps too much at times, as the access to mainstream and social media provides them with a wealth of information often too mature, too soon for their developing minds.

Although it's a moment in time filled with angst, emotion and sometimes fear as lives and bodies change and attitudes sometimes rear their heads, I love fifth-graders, because in the midst of the drama, I see limitless potential to channel that energy into improvement and confidence. Each day, I get to be an actress, an advertiser of sorts, to sell learning to my students as a vital part of their future. I'm the reading enthusiast, the mathematician, the historian and occasionally the mad scientist. I established a school newspaper, *Smoke Signals*, with the fifth-graders at Tomahawk, where they learn about the newspaper process, from quoting interviews correctly to graphic design, to the business aspects of selling a newspaper to the student body. I coordinate the school social studies fair, which allows students to choose a topic of interest to research, create a display and presentation, and share it with judges, who are our school business partners, the National Maritime Center.

My classroom and school is my joy, my pride and my contribution to the improvement of this volatile, ever-changing world. Life isn't black and white, 8.5 by 11, and sitting on a desk; learning shouldn't be either. If asked what makes me the teacher of the year, I would hope that it would be my passion, my creative approach to making learning a joy. Joy is what brings us to this profession. We're in an era of education driven by data, and our students are subject to test after test assessing their skills and readiness. I worry that, in spite of the opportunities that exist with the Common Core to elevate innovation, creativity and imagination into our classrooms, that the culture being created of excessive testing is going to suffocate our efforts. Children are a work in progress. Everyone in this room was once a 10-year-old. What were your interests? How long could you sit still? What did a number, a score on a paper mean to you? We want our students to be the next generation of thinkers, explorers, artists, inventors. That means the bulk of their instructional time needs to be opportunities to move, manipulate and make.

We hear a lot about accountability in education and using quantifiable data such as tests to grade our schools and evaluate our teachers. Why not? Businesses, companies do it to measure their progress and to yield better data. The thing is, my students aren't products, they're people. They are the people that will be the employees, the employers, the entrepreneurs that find cures, craft inventions, compose masterpieces. My future business leaders — and teachers — need to write convincingly, think creatively, speak articulately and treat others with respect and kindness. I am not only accountable for how my students do on a standardized test — but more importantly, for the passion I put into their hearts to have confidence in their abilities and the power to overcome the obstacles in their lives. The most intelligent, creative, innovative professionals I know are teachers and given the resources and time those outstanding qualities that teachers have to possess to be successful in the classroom transfer on to the impressionable young people in our schools.

True accountability won't ever be measured by test scores, but in the countless lives of students and families we improve. We can have classrooms that meet a percentage, reach a score on a test, but what if the pressure to test, to retest, to analyze eats away at the time, the precious, limited time, a teacher has to



ROBERT SNYDER

Tomahawk Intermediate School fifth-grade teacher Erin Sponaugle will be working with PBS Learning Media as one of the 100 Digital Innovators during the 2014-15 school year.

Education must also be at the forefront of any and every decision made in the board room or the House or Senate floor, not an afterthought. It is the profession that is the foundation of every other, from the lawyer, to the businessman, to the politician. You came to this place, this level of your career, because of a teacher. A child's future is too precious to waste at the hands of political discourse.

make learning, life the multifaceted object that it is? What if it means that all the things I am, I've done, wouldn't make me a teacher of the year? Teaching is an art form and a heart form. The humanity in our profession supersedes that of any other. If you're in this room today, you are accountable for the success of our students. As a parent, lawmaker, business leader. You are accountable if you are a member of the community in which there are students that need someone to contribute and care. Accountability is a shared responsibility among all involved in the life of a child.

Our teachers — the most vital, valuable resource we have to move forward. Education is a business — the business of mind molding, policy making and leadership. Too often teachers are left of the last two I mentioned. Teachers are professionals. It takes years of education and experience to be an expert. I'm honored to be named a board member of the Education Alliance, and hope that it's a step in giving more educators a seat at the table among groups with an interest in education.

Within the next decade, half of our state's teachers will be eligible for retirement. That leaves our state with the need for highly qualified teachers, as well as educators capable and willing to support and mentor the rising number of beginning teachers. The Eastern Panhandle sits between Maryland and Virginia. The lure of higher salaries attracts teachers to leave our area and go to bordering counties in other states, to logically provide better for themselves and their families.

We need to encourage and attract our best students, our most talented individuals, to become educators — but there must be a committed effort to refine the quality of pre-service preparation and improve the quality of life needed to compete with other highly esteemed professions. It's important to support our teachers through mentoring and solid preparation in pre-service programs. Yet we must build upon that foundation once they become a part of the fabric of the community where they live and teach. Sometimes,

that means taking extraordinary measures to provide them with housing and resources as they establish their careers. For our teachers who have demonstrated exemplary skills through National Board Certification — a rigorous process for teachers to demonstrate their teaching abilities — it means continuing to provide them with the incentive to stay through leadership opportunities and financial incentives to combat higher pay in other states. Accessibility and affordability is essential in providing the resources for teachers at any stage of their careers to thrive and excel.

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As we go forward in education, both our schools and businesses need to be united in our expectations and how we approach solutions to problems. When I speak to pre-service teachers, I share with them my four A's to success in the classroom and beyond. They also serve as a foundation for any stakeholder that needs to collaborate with others for the sake of our children.

The first A is ask. We have to be willing to humble ourselves and seek the resources that will best meet the needs of our teachers and students. There is no excuse to be too proud to ask for help and clarification when the future of the next generation is at stake.

The second A is to anticipate. The world, technology is changing at an alarming rate, and it's the world our children will need to thrive in, not only with the peers in their classrooms, but with those around the world. Last summer I was in Germany to learn about the country's education system. I've met some of the future colleagues of my students here in West Virginia. They start learning English in fifth-grade and by the time they are juniors or seniors in the equivalent of high school are getting their math, history and science

instruction in English. There is no stigma in choosing to pursue an apprenticeship or technical education over university as vocational education is highly lauded. I could go on, but the message is clear that, while we are consumed with data and statistics, other countries are forging ahead in ways that are the fabric of their culture. We have to look ahead to what our students truly need to become members of a global society.

The third A: advocate. It's why you are here today. We must genuinely be the voice of the interests of the children in this state. We must advocate for what is right and developmentally appropriate for the success of students in classrooms in West Virginia and beyond. Our state is just one piece of the 50-state puzzle. When you speak professionally, sincerely on behalf of the children in this state, you're doing it for every child in America. We need to provide our teachers and business leaders with the tools to effectively advocate for our students through the use of mainstream and social media.

And number four: Adopt. Flexibility is key in the teaching and business community. I have had many special events and speaking engagements this year, but my favorite has been speaking to and meeting the students of the West Virginia Future Educators Association. Their leader, Susan Rice, does a phenomenal job of preparing those students for the classroom and it amazed me as to what they knew about preparing lessons and speaking about the profession. They are the next generation of teachers, the ones we must be prepared to support when they enter the profession over this next decade. So much will have changed when they are handed the key to their first classroom. We must practice what they will need to be modeled, and that is the art of adapting to the changes, the challenges presented to us in education. How do we react? There is so much in education we can't control — the demographics of where we teach, the change in industry, the socioeconomic status of our students. It is our response to the situations we are faced with, the deck we are handed, that allows us to make the best of where we are and to collaborate to find the solutions. Complaining won't solve our issues, but action will.

I will close with telling you about the most influential teacher in my life. My aunt, Dawn Mose, grew up in Martinsburg — and in poverty. But she worked hard in school and graduated high school early. She then graduated from college with a degree in elementary education and became a teacher, providing for her family and ensuring that my mother graduated high school. Hers is a story of rising against the odds to become a productive member of her community. And that is what it is all about. We must ask, anticipate, advocate and adapt as we support those with the most precious position on earth so that we know how to answer when asked, "What are you learning, West Virginia?"

— Erin Sponaugle is the 2014 West Virginia Teacher of the Year.

ED RABEL

Voters have reached the tipping point — no more entrenched politicians

The tipping point is the critical point in an evolving situation that leads to a new and irreversible development. The term is said to have originated in the field of epidemiology: when an infectious disease reaches a point beyond any local ability to control it from spreading more widely. A tipping point is often considered to be a turning point. Or, in the case of my independent bid for Congress in West Virginia's Second Congressional District, the tipping point is imminent because a critical mass among the voters has been reached.

If I have learned anything from people while campaigning and crisscrossing the district, it is this: voters have reached a critical threshold in their charity for entrenched politicians, both Democrat and Republican. What is more, they are on the verge of rejecting them out of disgust, in large part, for their mindless, numbing and perpetual subservience to giant foreign

corporations responsible for destroying our magnificent hills and turning our communities into sacrifice zones.

Mountaintop removal has devastated 500 mountains, all of them in West Virginia. And hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," threatens the air we breathe, the water we drink, the communities we love and the climate on which we all depend. Accordingly, in the words of Howard Beale, a character in the satirical film *Network*, voters I meet are yelling, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take this anymore!"

Just how "mad" the voters are can be seen in a recent poll that gives me an astonishing 10 percent of the vote in a three-way race with the parochial Democrat Nick Casey and the stranger to West Virginia, Republican Alex Mooney. My slice of the vote is astonishing because both Casey and Mooney, beholden to Big Coal and the "frackers," are spending millions in

corporate money to garner votes while I depend on small donations from individual citizens to help me win. In the coming weeks, political analysts predict my share of the vote will increase dramatically.

In the meantime, the Democratic Party hierarchy, fearful of the rising tide of revulsion among the voters, is raising the tired, old argument that a vote for me will spoil the election and give it to Mooney. That argument worked in the past. But it will fail this time. This is the year of independent resurgence in which people are rejecting the failed policies of traditional parties and their corporate sponsors. I refer you to your next-door neighbor, Virginia, where an anonymous Brat bested an unconquerable Cantor. After beating Cantor like a rented mule, Brat said this: "Dollars don't vote. You do."

If Tea Party, carpetbagger Mooney and crypto-Republican Casey are depending on dollars to

elect them this time around, they may be in for a surprise. The surprise could be the people and populism — both opaque to those who are used to having it their own way at the expense of the voters. In other words, they are flunking the butterfly test.

In chaos theory, the small flap of a butterfly's wings, in time, leads to unexpected and unpredictable results. Very tiny errors in initial measurements can yield enormous unpredictability, far out of proportion with what would be expected mathematically. By thinking, wrongly, that the voters are predictable and that they can be taken for granted, my opponents are in for a rude awakening. We are at the tipping point.

— A native West Virginian and veteran CBS and NBC news correspondent, Ed Rabel is running as an independent for the Second Congressional District