

NEWS

For retiring North High assistant principal Teresa O'Neill, time is the best teacher



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Editor's Note: This is one of several stories this week on retiring educators in the Worcester school district.

WORCESTER — Assistant Principal Teresa O'Neill cannot walk more than a few feet down the hallways of North High School without being stopped by a student who has something to share or a question to ask.

Over the span of her 35-year career, which will come to an end this month when the school year ends, O'Neill has learned that time is the best teacher.

“When I was a young teacher, I was as crazy hyper as every young teacher, like, ‘Oh, my God, this kid is going to fail, their life is going to just burn in ruins and it’s going to be my fault,’” O'Neill said. “As I got older, I would see these kids that I thought were lost forever in the community and guess what? They were fine.”

She said that having those experiences was a reality check.

“I don't care if you're the richest person in the world or the poorest person in the world, education is the foundation of everything,” O'Neill said. “But time is also very important and kids need time to grow up. They just need time to grow up and we have to give them that time to grow up.”

She said it is important to be patient with students and, “let them know the door is always open, even if they make a bad choice.”

More: Worcester educator Lisa Cantwell retires after 35 years with Worcester public schools

At North High, students are divided alphabetically by last name and assigned a staff member in the school. For the last four years, O'Neill has been in charge of students whose last names fall between the letters R and Z.

O'Neill's open-door policy has not only helped her learn each student's name and develop a rapport with them but also provided them an adult that they can feel approaching in school.

O'Neill's office, although already mostly packed up for the end of the school year, still has student artwork and notes on the wall behind her.

Students coming into her office might look for a water bottle she may have grabbed from the end of lunch if they're thirsty or a space to get school work or club projects done.

“I was always pretty easy with that stuff, even before the pandemic,” she said. “But then with the pandemic, any means of communication, it was everything. Remind, Google Voice, your own cellphone numbers, which is what I did because it's easier for me ... everybody here is like that.”

Recently, one of O’Neill’s students had texted her a link to a YouTube video that detailed his four years at North High.

“In the video he talks about I’m retiring because of him. Because I'm sick of his crimes,” she said. “It was really really funny. I laughed and it made my whole day.”

Desire to connect with students

She said that she would not lie and say that things always worked out with students because “they didn’t.

“I engaged in power struggles with kids that didn't end well for me and them but time, like I said, is the best teacher,” O’Neill said.

However, it was her desire to connect with students that initially inspired her to get into education as a career.

“I felt that if I could make a connection with a kid and then I could get that kid to do their homework and study for a test and help that kid move through the years of high school to graduate from high school, then that was better than working in a bank or working in an insurance agency,” O’Neill said. “Not to downgrade people who work in banks or work in insurance agencies, but that's what I felt.”

Born and raised in Ireland, O’Neill’s mother and father left school by the end of seventh grade to start working and contributing to their families.

“My (two) older siblings, they didn't get the opportunity to go for a third-level education,” she said. “It was just me and my brother who's one step above me. We were the only two who got to go to college.”

O’Neill’s oldest siblings, her mother would say, are, “just as bright as you. They just didn't have your opportunity.”

She would go on to study English and history at University College Cork and considered law school.

Start at Burncoat Middle

While in college in Ireland, O’Neill met her husband who was a junior at UMass studying abroad. She would travel the United States and get married.

“I came over here and my mother-in-law, God rest her, was teaching at Burncoat and she got me a job as a day-by-day sub at Burncoat (Middle School),” she said. “I was like, “This is fun. I can do this.”“

In 1985, while working at Burncoat Middle, she was also taking night classes at the former Worcester State College in an effort to complete her teaching certification.

She started student-teaching at Burncoat Middle and met North High principal Lisa Houlihan, who was also student-teaching at the school and who was also a former elementary school classmate of O'Neill's husband.

O'Neill was able to complete her teaching certification during that time but struggled to find work in the Worcester public school district until she was hired by the Key Program, an organization that provides assistance to children and their families who may be experiencing hardships.

"The schedule suited me because I was pregnant with my first son," O'Neill said. "From there, through people I knew at the Key Program working with kids who were in DYS (Department of Youth Services), I was asked to go work there."

O'Neill would work for the Department of Youth Services in Westborough for 10 years.

20 years at Woodland Day

After that, O'Neill spent the next 20 years at Woodward Day School, where she taught students who were suspended long term from Worcester Public Schools and also served as a site administrator until moving to North High School.

"I loved working at Woodward Day School. It was the best experience a person could ever have as an educator," she said. "At one point, we had the student with the highest SAT scores in the city and the highest MCAS scores in the city because smart kids make mistakes too."

She said it was a difficult job because they had to work with students who were struggling with different aspects of their education.

"We had extremely bright kids that needed to be challenged and were getting ready to go off to college," O'Neill said. "But then we also had kids who struggled academically, struggled behaviorally. It was challenging but I learned an awful lot there."

O'Neill was recruited by Houlihan to North High, where she has been the last four years as an assistant principal.

"I actually really feel like I missed out a lot by not having more time in a comprehensive high school because I really, really enjoyed working here, even with the pandemic and everything which sucked," she said. "I wish I had four more years."

While all of these experiences were transformational for O'Neill as an educator, she said she was able to bond with her students by living in the same community as them.

"I've always interacted with my students in the community," she said. "There's no such thing as, I go to work and I come home and I separate. It's like, I go to work, I go to the supermarket and guess what? Half the kids I teach work in the supermarket."

Generations of families

She also credits having family members of her students in past classes as well throughout her career.

“Their older brother came here, their older sister came here, their parents came here, their aunts and uncles came here and there's just this long history. I mean, I've had generations of people,” O’Neill said.

It is this long history that has helped O’Neill become a mentor to young teachers, offering them advice on interacting with students.

“When you're in an interaction with a student, you're only thinking about you and how you're interacting with that one student,” she said. “You’ve got to remember, all the rest of the kids are looking at you. They're all taking it in and they're making an assessment about you based on how you're interacting.”

She said that if a teacher is disrespectful or dismissive of a student, the rest of the class is also going to notice and make a judgment based on that interaction.

“There’s nothing wrong with apologizing,” O’Neill said. “I apologize around here all of the time.”

While she has been able to offer mentorship and advice based on her 35 years of experience, when the school year comes to an end, O’Neill said she will be thinking about her next move.

“I've just been in education. I've never experienced anything else,” she said. “What I love about this career is that every day is something new. There is absolutely nothing predictable about coming to work. You can't make any plans here.”

Ready for something new

However, while she will miss the unpredictability of education, she is ready to try something new, she said.

O’Neill said she plans to spend time traveling and visiting with friends and family but that she is also ready to start thinking about her next career move.

“I'm thinking about getting my real estate license. I talked about that a lot, but whether I'll actually go through with it or not, I don't know,” she said. “My husband said ‘Just because you watch 50,000 episodes of "House Hunters" doesn't mean that you can be a real estate agent,’ but I would like to try something completely different.”