

## NEWS

# To kids, with love: Longtime Worcester ESL teacher Patty Wiser to retire



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

WORCESTER — If Patty Wiser were starting her career in education today, rather than 35 years ago when she first became a classroom teacher at the now defunct Adams Street School, she doesn't think she would have lasted as long as she did.

Teaching English as a second language at Canterbury Street Magnet Computer-Based School, where she has worked for over three decades, Wiser's career in Worcester Public Schools will come to an end in June.

"I like to say that classroom teachers are rock stars...they work so hard. There's so much thrown at them," Wiser said. "Their job changes daily. They have new kids coming in all day. They have new programs coming in all day. They are just so overworked and they just handle it all so well."

Aside from a year at the Adams Street School, Wiser has made a second home for herself at Canterbury Street School, where she worked as a classroom teacher and an ESL for 34 years combined.

Her love of children and good experiences with teachers in her youth inspired Wiser to become a teacher, she said.

"I like younger children, although I've really come to appreciate the little older ones because you can really talk to them," Wiser said. "I had good experiences growing up with teachers, so I had some really good role models in Worcester."

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When Wiser entered Canterbury Street School, she started as a classroom teacher, a role she would hold for 20 years. However, needing a break from the classroom, Wiser said she took a short leave from teaching to move to Connecticut for a couple of years with her husband.

It seemed like "destiny" she said, after an ESL teaching position at Canterbury Street School had opened up, "which almost never happens."

## Transition to ESL instruction

She landed the job and made the transition from classroom teaching, to the more tight-knit, small-group learning environment of ESL instruction.

“I always worked with that population and I always loved that,” she said. “I liked the idea of small groups because I think you get a nice impact from small groups. Plus it is a break from classroom teaching and I had already taught for 20 years, so I probably needed a break.”

Students enrolled in the ESL program work hard, she said, because they “want to learn so bad.

“I love ESL, I really do. It's great. It's really great,” Wisner said. “They learn so much from the other kids, so it's amazing. It really is an amazing field.”

The job can be challenging, she said, since Worcester teaches students who speak over 70 languages.

“One of my partners is a Spanish speaker and so it's great,” she said. “If you're really stuck, you can ask for it, but basically you're just supposed to teach them English in the best ways that you can.”

However, Wisner said, while knowing more than one language can be helpful for the job, it can also put “the other kids at a disadvantage sometimes.”

Despite the challenges, Wisner said one of the best aspects of ESL teaching was watching students go from not being able to speak or read in English to having strong skills in both areas with some achieving those skills relatively quickly.

She recalled a recent, humorous exchange with one of her students whom she was working on idioms with in second grade.

She had been chatting with a teacher while working with a group of students when one of the students said, “Let's get this show on the road.”

“We just laughed. I said, ‘That was a little rude,’ but oh my God, that was perfect. You got the video, ‘Let's get the show on the road,’” Wisner said.

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## **Challenges of pandemic**

The pandemic, she said, was challenging for her but it was especially challenging for classroom teachers.

“The middle-school teachers are definitely the ones talking about it as being hit the hardest and the emotions and just the mental part of the pandemic,” Wisner said.

She said that younger grades, such as the second-graders she works with, are on reading level and had been able to navigate the pandemic a bit better because of how hard the elementary school teachers worked.

For middle-school teachers, she said, the challenges were a bit different because of not only having to teach more complex material to students but also trying to support them as they enter their teenage years, which can be very emotional.

“It was hard on the little ones, but it was so much harder on them (middle-school students),” she said.

One positive aspect of the pandemic, she said, was that she grew more familiar with technology including slideshows.

“Everything I do now is on a slideshow. It's kind of my thing,” she said. “I learned a lot. And I think the kids learned a lot.”

She said she thinks that the online learning environment, which comes with glitches and technical difficulties, taught students to be more patient.

“I think it's way better than it could have been, for sure,” she said.

## **'Kids are kids'**

Born and raised in Worcester, Wisner attended Catholic school before attending Worcester State University for college.

She said that, while her education in Catholic school was fairly different from her work in public schools, there is one thing all schools have in common: The kids.

“Kids are kids. They want to learn. They're all in different circumstances, but kids are kids,” Wisner said. “The kids at St. Peter-Marian (High School) and the kids at South High (Community School), they're just the same.”

Wisner said she has a deep appreciation for the surrounding neighborhood around Canterbury Street School and that the school itself has become her home.

“I've met so many amazing people — parents who are working so hard and so many families that have been wonderful,” she said.

She said that, among the many aspects of her job, she is going to miss the people the most, “big and small.

“Something about Canterbury Street School, we've attracted some amazing people, really great co-workers that support each other and so many laughs,” Wisner said. “I went through everything here. I got married when I was here. Babies when I was here. My parents died when I was here. So it's a family. It really is.”

While not necessarily the experience all teachers have at their schools, Wisner said the personal lives of teachers at Canterbury Street School are intertwined with their professional lives.

“You share everything with them,” she said. “If you're getting married, everyone's excited for you. They'll have a shower.”

She is also going to miss the students, who are easy to grow attached to, she said.

“They're just good kids. We have our share of problems and I won't miss some of that at all,” she said. “There are kids that will literally drive you into the ground, but some of those are the ones you love the most.”

## **Advice: 'Love the kids'**

Her advice to teachers just entering the field would be, “You have to love the kids.”

“You're not always gonna like them, but you have to love them,” she said. “I tell the kids that all the time, I said ‘You don't have to like everyone here, but you have to be nice to them.’”

She said that while some kids will “drive you crazy,” it is important to remember that some of the students have “bad situations.

“For some kids, this is the best part of their day,” Wiser said. “You have to remember they've got stuff going on, like everybody and it's not always easy to do that. And you're not always going to be good at it — I was not always good at that — but you have to try to remember that sometimes this is their happy place.”

She said that she recently learned that one of her past students, who had been a bit of a handful when she taught them, had graduated from college this year.

“That's the best thing to hear. I was so excited,” Wiser said. “His little cousin is telling me, ‘Brian said to say “hi,” and he's graduating this weekend’ and that's great. That's incredible. It's very heartwarming.”

One challenge that Wiser is looking forward to not having to tackle is trying to arrive at school on time in the mornings, which she tended to “run a little bit close to the vest,” she said.

She is looking forward to not only being able to sleep in after retiring but also spend time with her family and getting back into exercising.

Wiser said she has considered taking up a part-time job, possibly continuing ESL with adults or working at a friend's store in Grafton.

While she will miss the students, her coworkers and the school over, she recognizes, she said, that “it's time.

“It's just time. You get to a certain point. I'm tired,” Wiser said. “I will miss the kids. I will miss my coworkers so much. I will miss this place but I want to do other things. I want to have time for other things.”