

NEWS

Worcester educator Lisa Cantwell retires after 35 years with Worcester Public Schools



Jeff A. Chamer

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

WORCESTER — There are two starting points for Lisa Cantwell's career in education — the first was when she was 5 and began teaching her younger siblings, the second was in 1987 when she started her first job in Worcester public schools.

Born, raised and educated in Worcester, Cantwell, 57, will be retiring at the end of this school year after spending her entire 35-year career as a teacher in the Worcester Public Schools system.

"I was the oldest of six children. My parents were always reading, always talking to us. I loved books, I saw their love of books and I loved taking care of my brothers and sisters," Cantwell said. "It was just a dream ... Some of my friends say not many people know what they want to do when they're a kid but I always wanted to be a teacher."

Currently teaching her final third-grade class at Quinsigamond School, Cantwell's first job was teaching special education in the resource room at South High Community School for a year.

From South High, she moved onto Canterbury Street Magnet Computer-Based School, where she continued to teach special education.

"It was a resource room so the children were...mostly in my room all day and I did that for 10 to 12 years at Canterbury," Cantwell said. "Then I switched over ... to teach the regular classroom."

She said that when she switched, schools began inclusion, during which "the special ed kids were involved like in the regular classroom."

Cantwell said she felt she could better serve students better if they were in her classroom.

One of her career highlights in special education was when she learned that a former student, who struggled to read and do other schoolwork, became a plumber.

"There's so many children that went on to school, even though they might have had some learning disabilities back then. They overcame it. I'd like to say I helped out with that," she said.

Bond formed with students

When teaching in the resource room, she said, she would have the same kids, "three years in a row a lot of the time.

"It's the bond you formed with them, trying to make their day a little better if they've had a bad day," Cantwell said.

She eventually moved to Quinsigamond School, where she works and from where she'll retire in June.

Cantwell gave credit to not only the administrators in the district, who she said have been "incredible," but also for the students.

"I've had students who would show up at my classroom door with their children and go to the principal and request that their child have me as a teacher, so that meant a lot," Cantwell said.

She said that running into adults whom she taught when they were kids, "makes it all worthwhile" when they mention how much of a difference she made with them as their teacher.

Another highlight from her career, she said, was a humorous misunderstanding she had with some students.

"I have kids that would write Miss Cantwell with an apostrophe," she said. "They would say, 'I can't, I can't do this, I can't do this,' and I'd say, 'Well, you can't say can't,' and they'd talk to each other, like, 'How are we going to say Miss Cantwell?'"

Apart from students during pandemic

For Cantwell, one of the hardest parts of the COVID-19 pandemic, aside from having to adapt to new technology, was not being with the students.

She said that she and her co-workers, "put in a lot of effort" to provide the best education they could receive during that time but she is grateful to be back in school.

"I came into school a couple of times to teach from here but it was sad. I couldn't do it. Seeing the empty bulletin boards and the empty halls, I'd rather do it at home and it was just so hard," Cantwell said. "Being here right now is just amazing to me ... Even the kids, they're just so happy to be back in school. It's been crazy."

She said that while there was an adjustment period for students are being forced to learn from home during the pandemic, they have made significant strides this year.

"They came in the beginning of year and I had given them these tests and one girl scored kindergarten-level because she didn't care, but she's reading above grade level," Cantwell said.

She has continued to use some of the technology students used during the pandemic to assist with math and reading, or even typing for students who struggled with writing. Otherwise she tries to keep students away from Chromebooks.

"They're great kids," Cantwell said. "The fourth-grade teachers are going to be so happy to get them."

Recently, she said, her students were left accidentally wandering the school after she had to leave early for an appointment and their substitute teacher hadn't shown up.

One of the students stepped up to get the rest of the class in order and managed to walk them from recess to their next class calmly.

The students in her class are close, she said, and it sometimes sounds like an episode of "Cheers" when a student shows up late or leaves early by calling their name.

"Instead of saying 'Norm!' they'll say 'Isabella!'" Cantwell said.

Involvement during retirement

She said that while she may be retiring from the Worcester public school district, she wants to continue being involved in education somehow.

"I'm going to definitely miss this. I am already worried about it. What am I going to do? I'd love to come in and tutor or volunteer ... I'm not done with school by any means," Cantwell said. "This has been more than just my career. This has been my life for a long time and I'm going to miss it."

Her reason for retiring, she said, is to be able to spend more time with and take care of her family.

"My parents are getting older. They're fine but they're getting older. I have an aunt and uncle that have been ill and I'm trying to help them because my parents are older," Cantwell said. "And my daughter just graduated from college, so I just feel like I need to be able to be available to my family if they need me."

She said that while she will miss the students and finds retiring difficult, she is confident in the new generation of educators entering classrooms.

"The younger generation that I've seen just working ... they just have so much energy and with all the changes, especially technology, they're way more up to date on it than I am and they come out with these amazing things," Cantwell said.

She said teachers begin to run out of ideas the longer they're in education and that she would often get ideas from the young teachers coming in.

"Becoming an educator is super hard with passing the MTELs (Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure) and just the way everything's changing," Cantwell said. "They're great. They're so dedicated, so I really think that we're gonna still be in good hands. As much as we're losing older teachers, they're dedicated."

Much time off a myth

She also said that the idea that teachers receive significant time off is untrue.

"If you drive by any school at the end of the day, you're gonna see a lot of cars and teachers still. We're not done at 2. 2:30." Cantwell said. "People that are leaving leave with bags. All

this stuff doesn't get done here."

One piece of advice she had to offer the new generation of teachers was to talk to someone if they are struggling.

"It's all about the kids. We're here for the kids. The next day is a new day and you've just got to talk to each other and go to all of the support systems that we have in the city of Worcester," Cantwell said. "Talk to your friends, your co-workers and go to your administration if you're struggling with something because we're all here for each other."

She encouraged new teachers to not give up because, "it's gonna be worth it.

"When you see a smile on a kid's face and they come back to you and give you a hug, it makes it all worth it," Cantwell said.