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### Teachers Make a Difference: An Interview with Jacquelyn Combs

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TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE  
AN INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELYN COMBS

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Spring, 1995

CHAPTER II  
TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE  
AN INTERVIEW WITH MASTER TEACHER JACQUELYN S. COMBS

Driving up to Stafford Elementary School, there was an aura of excitement. An interview appointment had been made with Jacquelyn S. Combs, winner of the 1992 Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award. The researchers knew a little about her from conversations on the telephone and a mutual acquaintance in education. Jackie was the principal at Stafford Elementary School, and one of the researchers had actually met her briefly when she had visited the Amanda Arnold Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas, where Jackie had formerly taught. The researchers were anticipating the meeting with curiosity and a bit of anxiety. Upon entering the school building, the secretary greeted the researchers, showing them around the school facility. The secretary was very cordial and seemed to fit the voice that had been heard on the telephone. She was warm and friendly, and was the type of person a principal would want to have for a secretary, to greet people entering the building and give them a good first impression of the school. The researchers looked around the building, taking pictures and asking questions all the while.

The actual school building was a very nice facility. It seemed quite large for an elementary school that housed about one hundred eighty students. There was an older section and a new section, and the district was in the process of building an activity gymnasium onto the building, to be used by school and recreational sports personnel. As the researchers left the new library, they were met by Jackie, who greeted them with a warm smile, sharing a handshake and introductions. Jackie was a young woman, looking thirty-ish, but actually in her early forties. She was dressed nicely and again, seemed to

fit the image held by the researchers. After a brief synopsis of what the researchers anticipated from the encounter, they were allowed to visit several classrooms where Jackie interacted with the children. In each room, it was obvious that Jackie was a welcome friend. It was plain to see that she was at ease with the children and that she genuinely cared for them, and they knew it!

After the brief tour, the end of the school day was approaching. Jackie wanted to be outdoors to see the children on their way from the school building. She sent the children on their way with a smile and a friendly farewell. After the children had left the building, Jackie was ready for the interview.

The interview questions were developed with the research objectives in mind. They were designed to elicit responses from Jackie that would help the researchers to know her and her philosophies better. They are included in Appendix A at the end of this paper. During the interview, a videocamera was used to record Jackie's responses. The tone of the interview was professional yet friendly. Jackie willingly shared her views on education, children, and life. She said that she was a bit nervous in front of the camera and that she did not like to have her picture taken, but that was not obvious upon viewing the videotape. She seemed confident and at ease in talking about her professional life and love---teaching. The rest of this chapter is devoted to information and insight gained from the interview and conversations with Jackie Combs.

The Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award is an award given each year by the Milken Family Foundation to deserving educators. The goal of the Milken National Foundation is to recognize educators, because they feel that educators do not get

enough recognition, in light of the work they do for children and for the country. The Milken Foundation is headquartered out of Santa Monica, California, and is a philanthropic institution whose purpose is to discover and advance inventive ways to build human resources. The foundation's National Educator Awards are given in twenty states and are designed to reward educators who are making significant contributions to educating children. Its aim is also to attract young people into education by increasing public recognition and appreciation of the profession. 1992 was the first year that the awards were given in Kansas. Jackie traveled to Santa Monica, California to receive the award and attend the symposium honoring all the Milken Award winners. Every year Jackie, along with all the Milken Award winners, gets to travel back to the Los Angeles area for a reunion and activities planned to honor these fine educators. Her husband travels with her and they again get to spend time with recognized educators from around the nation. When we interviewed Jackie, she was looking forward to the reunion, which was to take place the first week in May. When the foundation began the award program, educators were asked for input on the amount of monetary reward they felt would be appropriate to honor a deserving educator. Different amounts were purported, such as \$25 or \$2000. The foundation thought that educators were very humble because these types of rewards would not be at all comparable to an award in the business world. The foundation gives \$25,000 to each educator who wins the award, as a way of telling them that the work they do is very significant, worth more than they would imagine. The recipients must be nominated by superintendents or chambers of commerce in order to be considered for the award. However, the nomination is secret and is not revealed to the recipient.

When Jackie first learned of the award, it was a total surprise to her. The superintendent told her that there were some people from the state at the school to talk about QPA, Quality Performance Accreditation (a program designed for school improvement and accountability), and that she must bring her class to the gymnasium. Thinking to herself that these were strange circumstances, Jackie took her class to the gym. To her surprise, the entire student body, faculty, the Kansas Commissioner of Education, Dr. Lee Groegemueller, the Kansas Deputy Commissioner, Dale Dennis, and a representative from the Kansas State Board of Education (who was a graduate of Stafford High School), along with her husband, were all there to announce her receipt of the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award and present her with a plaque from the Milken Foundation. She felt very excited but also humbled thinking of all the excellent educators in the state and in the country. The award was very motivating for her and a real honor, giving her opportunities to meet with educators from around the country. It has also provided avenues for her to get involved in educational issues and agendas at the state level. In visiting with Jackie, the researchers were of the opinion that Jackie is very humble about her career and her award. Jackie stated that she felt she was just lucky to be chosen for the award. After learning more about her, it was the researchers' opinion that Jackie is truly an outstanding educator, deserving of this award, and that it was far more than luck that caused her to be nominated and chosen for the award. In the years following the receipt of the award, Jackie has lived up to the honor by continuing to be an outstanding educator and leader.

Jackie has been in education for the past twenty-one years, fifteen as a classroom

teacher and three as a principal with three years as a substitute but out of the schools directly, to be at home with her children. She began her career as a Chapter I, Title I reading teacher working a lot with individual children. Since then she has taught pre-school through sixth grade, with the exception of grades four and five. Her teaching career has given her a view of the total child, which perhaps was part of the motivation for the move into administration. Her move into administration was somewhat of a natural evolution of her career and she had many people helping her along the way as mentors and supporters to help her with that move. While working at Amanda Arnold Elementary School in Manhattan, Kansas, Barbara Maughmer (colleague) was one of Jackie's mentors along with Clark Reinke, principal of Amanda Arnold Elementary School. He challenged her and encouraged her to try new things, including administration. She also had some professors who really encouraged her along the way including Jerry Bailey at Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas. She felt like these people, along with her husband, who is also in administration, really helped her to decide to go into administration.

When Jackie first thought about being a principal, the idea was totally unappealing. She had always had the idea of the principal as a boss, a manager, or a know-it-all person who had to be in charge of everything. She thought that the principal's role entailed doing volumes of paperwork and being a disciplinarian. Although some of those ideas she held did constitute a portion of the role of the administrator, the picture was larger than that. As she prepared for administration, she became more aware that the role of the administrator in the 1990's was that of a facilitator, a team member enabling the faculty to reach their full potential so that children could reach their full potential. The role of the

principal, Jackie stated, has become one of providing help and support to teachers along with strategies for them to accomplish the things they want to accomplish. In her opinion, the things that make administration rewarding include being able to go into a classroom feeling a sense of contribution to the good feelings experienced by the teacher and children in the classroom. The sense of being a team is appealing to Jackie and that is what she has tried to build at Stafford Elementary School.

While teaching at the Amanda Arnold Elementary School, Jackie experienced the sense of teamwork, challenge, and support that she has been striving to attain at the Stafford Elementary School. Jackie knew that when people work together closely as a supportive team, almost a family, a synergistic atmosphere breeds success for faculty, students, and administration. Jackie felt that everyone in the school should be a leader and her role was that of a facilitator to get them involved, both in their own roles and as leaders themselves. She pointed out that as part of the school improvement program she had a team of teachers presenting at an Effective Schools Conference in regard to math curriculum, and that they had planned the presentation by themselves and were handling the entire presentation alone. She felt that her role was to get her faculty to be leaders, to branch out and to grow and be excited about what they are doing, and want to share that knowledge and excitement with others.

As a teacher, she herself had that kind of opportunity, to grow professionally and develop her skills, provided through the family atmosphere and leadership at Amanda Arnold Elementary School. While in the classroom, Jackie was the type of teacher who always wanted to do a good job but stayed in the background, uninvolved, until mentors



(Maughmer and Reinke) pushed her and challenged her to grow and stretch professionally, letting her experience a renewed sense of excitement about her work. She wants to be the same type of leader, providing her faculty with those same kinds of opportunities.

Jackie said she feels that she and her team are learning and growing. Stafford Elementary is a Phase Two school in the QPA process. They have a plan and strategies that they have worked on for school improvement and accountability, with parents and community involved, which create a shared vision of where the school is going and how it is going to get there. With everyone working together, she stated that there is a strong commitment to the school and its goals. Everyone is moving in the same direction with a sense of caring, for each other and the vision. Part of the team feeling included the fact that faculty members were willing to share ideas and integrate curriculum, rather than working alone. Parental volunteers are also included in classrooms, which creates an atmosphere of collaboration---a goal for which Jackie has striven at Stafford Elementary School.

Jackie's educational philosophy is "all children can learn." This meshes with the Stafford Elementary School mission statement, which is: "The Stafford Elementary School will foster the maximum development of each child's potential to learn and succeed in a rapidly changing society." She believes that, and feels that teachers and parents, along with the entire community, work together to meet the needs of children, ensuring their success and developed potential. She felt that risk-taking was another important part of that philosophy, and that children must be taught that they don't really fail, but rather use mistakes as a learning experience and move on. Children must be taught that they can only

grow by taking chances and being willing to reach out. Jackie's life philosophy went hand-in-hand with her educational philosophy: it is important to take chances. She wants to let the students know that they are safe to take chances at school, and strives to build an atmosphere of respect for everyone, while letting them develop a sense of responsibility.

Throughout her teaching career, these philosophies have moved Jackie along the pathway of attaining the level of master teacher. As a classroom teacher holding the philosophy that all children can learn, she worked hard to meet the learning styles of the different children and tried to make learning exciting and fun. In her early career, trying to meet individual needs meant ability grouping and reading groups. Although Jackie always felt that the real quality time was when the students were reading and learning on their own, teaching strategies at the time pointed to ability grouping. She tried to make learning meaningful by bringing in real life experiences so that children felt learning was valuable to them. This led her to explore hands-on learning which made the learning more fun and meaningful for her and the children. She is a definite believer in hands-on learning and feels like children get excited about learning through the hands-on approach. Although she realizes that perhaps not everything can or should be hands-on in the classroom, she also believes that if a hands-on learning approach is not used, the learning styles of many children may be omitted.

Through the years, Jackie's philosophies have remained fairly constant while specific teaching strategies, like ability grouping, have changed. The whole language philosophy and integration has been employed at Stafford Elementary School while Jackie has been there. Grouping is done by interest instead of ability. Students needing help with certain skills

are grouped together for practice purposes, but this isn't the same as an ability group and the children do not remain in a group for a long period of time.

Learning should be a challenge, according to Jackie, an on-going, life-long process. Jackie thinks that she has been able to demonstrate her belief in the philosophy that all children can learn, part of that demonstration being a great caring for all children. The whole language approach to learning let Jackie bring in the other part of the philosophy, that of risk-taking. By using the whole language approach and growing in the use of other teaching strategies, Jackie has enabled her students to take chances and see all subjects as integrated, fitting together and connecting, just like real life. Through these strategies, the children have learned to write their own stories, pick out their own books, be good thinkers, and be risk takers. These strategies are helping the students of Stafford Elementary School to be challenged to become life-long learners.

Jackie stated her definition of a good teacher in this way: "A good teacher is able to meet the needs of the students and uses lots of different teaching strategies. A good teacher shows a genuine respect for students and cares about them not only as a student, but cares about them as a person." Jackie believes that a good teacher makes learning fun and exciting, and something that the students will really enjoy. A good teacher, through the use of many teaching strategies, does not continually stand at the front of the classroom lecturing, but is actually a facilitator in his/her own classroom, being involved in the whole learning process and enabling the students to handle the learning by themselves. The good teacher must see the role of the teacher as being very large, an enabler and facilitator, in addition to a disseminator of information. ...

A master teacher, according to Jackie, is a person who has selected education as a profession and is constantly growing and learning, being able to meet the needs of children. A master teacher is not necessarily a teacher who has won an award, but just a professional who puts the children first and is making a difference in their lives.

Jackie thought that her staff was on the road toward being very good educators, if not master teachers. Jackie hoped that she had grown and improved over the years and wanted her teachers to feel that they had the security and support to grow and improve through taking risks and learning from mistakes. Jackie also hoped that she had modeled to the faculty ways to work together, and that they would in turn take those models into the classroom. One of the ways in which the faculty works together, as stated previously, is in the area of sharing ideas. In this way, the faculty not only shows teamwork, but also risk-taking by being willing to share ideas and be open with each other rather than isolated from each other. The faculty realizes that there is no competition among them, but a sense of family, trust, and support in being a true team. Hopefully, these same feelings can be transmitted to students, making classes actually feel like teams.

In order to facilitate some of this same sense of teamwork in students, class meetings are held each week at the present time at Stafford Elementary School. A class meeting is a meeting of the entire class once or twice a week to discuss problems, and solutions to those problems through the use of teamwork. Throughout the week, students write down anything that they want to talk about at the class meeting. The class meeting is begun with positives, with the children saying or writing kind and positive things to each other and talking about how the classroom can be improved. When a class meeting is held,

a problem or concern is presented for the entire class to discuss. They present issues and formulate solutions. The meeting builds good rapport between all of the children and helps them to grow in respect for one another. This type of approach is based on research from Jane Nelson, in her book Positive Discipline.

Jackie told us that she felt excited about some of the things that were happening at Stafford Elementary School. The faculty, including Jackie, have high expectations for the school and for themselves. The school improvement plan which they have developed and agreed on together, has allowed them to have a common focus as all are working toward the implementation of those stated goals and objectives. Working together as a team, with Jackie as facilitator, has payed off for the school in various ways. One example that Jackie gave was of a teacher who had been very uncomfortable with the use of cooperative learning in his classroom. He thought that the concept did not work in his room and was reluctant to employ the method. However, through the support from the team and a principal who encouraged risk-taking, today the teacher is comfortable with the technique and uses it regularly in his classroom. Jackie attributed that success to the feeling created throughout the school that teachers have the support of the principal to take risks, and if the principal walks in the room and things are not going well, they can still feel comfortable. Jackie knew that kind of administrative support was important to all her faculty, has allowed Stafford Elementary to improve, and will continue to allow improvement.

When asked to discuss the direction of education, Jackie answered in this way: "Well, I see now as an exciting time in education, because we know more about how kids

learn. We have lots of research, we are able to pinpoint strategies that work. It's a time when I feel like as a nation, we are kind of focused in on education right now. It is an exciting time." Jackie shared with us her thoughts on future challenges, the big challenge being technology in her mind. She felt that the school paradigm must shift in order to prepare children for the future. We, as the educational community, have tended to portray school in a particular way to the rest of the world saying, in effect, "this is what school looks like." Jackie proposed that we, as educators, broaden our visions to ask "What could school be like?" Her idea of school is a learning community with everyone in the community involved in the school.

She feels we must look at school in a new way and transform school so that children don't necessarily have to be in a classroom all day to be in school. Children may be out in the community doing an activity or home working on their computers, or some other task. She stated that she feels we must be ready to move ahead and make changes, to be ready to look at technology and to see technology as a tool and a way to better our students' futures. Jackie shared that she feels we must create within students the higher level thinking skills and ethics. She felt that ethical behavior must accompany the use of technology and must be taught to students. She felt that we do have many challenges ahead as educators, but that we can meet those challenges if everyone is working toward the same goal.

Jackie gave us her opinions about present and future trends in education. Jackie thought that the traditional scheduling of school attendance for nine months, with three months off in the summer, should be given a hard look. She felt that students may benefit

more with the shrinking of the gap between the end of May and the first of September. She felt that because many students go to summer school and many need longer amounts of time to meet outcomes, and teachers also want to be able to offer enrichment, that some scheduling experiments should be undertaken. Perhaps the answer is not necessarily more time in school but a flexible scheduling that allows for shorter vacation times---like a year-round schooling with short breaks between units or semesters.

Another trend discussed was that of the middle school. Jackie told us that in Stafford, the sixth grade is included in the elementary school. The educators and parents seem to be satisfied with that configuration as the children are not bothered with changing classes and teachers and a mixed schedule. Jackie's own son, however, was in a middle school situation and was really enjoying that setting. She felt like both approaches for sixth grade could be positive and didn't know which approach was actually the best. She favors the idea of integrating curriculum, which is better facilitated by the elementary sixth grade. She felt that perhaps with the idea of block scheduling and thinking more creatively about middle school and high school scheduling that perhaps classes would not have to change every fifty minutes and more integrated curriculum could be used in those settings also.

It was clear to the researchers, at the close of the interview, that Jackie was truly a master teacher. Her passion for teaching and for children was evident throughout the interview and the researchers left with a greater understanding and appreciation of the qualities inherent in an educator at the master level in the profession. The researchers were the ones that felt humbled and honored by the opportunity to meet and visit with Jackie Combs. Jackie ended the interview by reiterating the fact that she had so much help

in getting to where she was at the present time in the field of education. She attributed much of her success to those who challenged her to become a true master teacher. She feels that there are so many great educators and she is really honored to have received the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award for 1992. Her belief is that teachers are making a difference with children and "that's the greatest kind of reward that you can have."