Good writing about schools takes us to messy, complicated places. Teachers understand that about their schools. A man in a suit who is running for office by “holding those teachers accountable” grasps a lever of power; he does not grasp what a school is. Do not claim to fix that which you do not love and understand. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes: “Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats, and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business” (80). We insist on going about our business. We are alive. Our school is alive, and it can take a long time to grasp how precious and complicated that life is.

I was a poet before becoming a high school teacher. For a dozen years I’d had part-time jobs, lived cheaply, and begun to publish. As a new teacher, I tried to keep poetry going while learning to survive in my school, and what I’ve come to think of as school-house poems have appeared in a series of books over the past decades. Writing, mine and my students’, trying to see our shared reality, became a way of being a teacher; looking back, I see that this work developed in three stages.

The first thing I learned as a teacher/writer was how to pay attention to individuals and specific moments. There is a piece about a kid who made graffiti, all along the west side of Manhattan and in its tunnels. He became famous, especially among the young. What he put up was, I wrote, “a practiced signature / an artist’s tag, the name of a name,” an enlargement of life, until he fell from Brooklyn Bridge. Then there was the small boy with a huge backpack who I knew travelled deep into Brooklyn, always reading Shakespeare: “The books changed often, but it was always / Shakespeare he followed down the filthy steps / holding the pages he’d ride home.” It was as if the plays were a shield he bore, a shining name that might deflect danger.

I met kids who were becoming writers, even on the subway: “a student folded among commuters, / has a notebook in her hands that have touched / nothing unimportant. She opens / words that have been used before / but not like this and never here, this tunnel . . .” Or, “A girl’s writing razors the skin / of her life. She does not stitch it up.” I wrote about kids by investigating struggle: “Kids pour in, sprawling at their lockers, / eyeing watches and this day / one more thing they didn’t start that is beginning.” It’s the permanent condition of kids, even though 20 years later they are eying their phones.

Later came an enlargement, setting people in place and time. A teacher riding the subway and a bus days after 9/11/2001 sees “faces flat with sorrow, doubt, or is it fear / who can pull the cord of this emergency?” A teacher sees clingy parents and children on the train, hears a boy from the back of the bus complain loudly about his teacher (me), sees a boy in an expensive wheelchair reading a book as two men guide him up a ramp into a van. The teacher begins a winter day by seeing children, sorrow and survival. Those struggles have context, city life: “there is weeping at the bus stop / I look and look away, as teachers learn to do. / One girl is red faced, the second, like a mother / cradles her, talks over her damp head.” The teacher goes ahead, spends the day with *Hamlet*, then, back at the bus stop, “the city goes on . . . enormous room / with three small figures waiting for a city bus.” The students are different when seen in the context of the great, grinding city they walk through.
and are fond of in a way that only city kids know about:

. . . a tall girl said, “I love my neighborhood! I go out, right? To all these faces on the corner going fast? I know none of them. They’re my neighbors! It is my corner!” That class was in the midst of Great Expectations, where London is the city one mind wakes to, a crowded and insistent dark.

Over the last decade, the poems ask bigger questions; they wonder about work in wider ways. They imagine a classroom as having a creative source, a secret flow.

There is a pond in my workplace, Room 318. Thoreau is one of the springs that feeds the pond, and the teacher lives, at pond-side, in an indoor world. Mid-winter, it has become April indoors:

this was spring. The room had filled from deep behind it—this I knew. Those feeding there took, like fish take oxygen from water, more than they could speak of, they were so busy being new.

A teacher stands at his desk. It is first period. The well-known faces and attitudes arrive: “To see all this is to stand apart. / The teacher pushes off from his desk. / He cannot not stand apart. He can / begin.” The longer he works, the more he knows of school, city, and self, the more he deals with the duality of both knowing and doing. He sees kids who are “busy growing faces / it is what they do, / these who mean to be themselves / these who enter an indifferent city.” These poems wonder about how teachers are born, how their past lives help when they confront actual kids. These poems imagine a man called “The Poet of Schools”: “His howl has cadence, / it is in lines, it hunts the dark places. / Disguised as an English teacher / he will be underestimated. Every time.” If schools and teachers are only respected for the scores their kids produce, the students and teachers who stand for other values are speaking in public voices. When kids are being pushed out into the world to fail, or ground to a sharp edge to succeed, poetry is a thing that stands only for itself, a thing that opens students and teachers to the widest sense of reality. It is a form of resistance.

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In the last of these poems, two teachers stand in the hall talking and watching two boys drag small bodies and large backpacks to class, “hurrying to be not so late. / Danny said, ‘It’s sacred.’ / He looked around. ‘It’s sacred,’ he said again. / The second teacher looked around.” In a sense, all the schoolhouse poems come from that looking around while grasping the word sacred. The word had come from another teacher, a real-life moment that grew into a perception: the world of a school is sacred. As teachers, we move deeper and deeper in our perceptions of the school, and town or city, we work and look around in. It is a lesson we all learn, whether or not we have time to find the words. I wonder if that is not the biggest lesson of all.

Our duty is to see the life of a school as the field where growth and learning occur. When the life of a school is weighted with fear, anger, apathy, or the stifling Saran Wrap of test scores, then there is a lot of gasping for air. A school rich in life breathes frustration, hilarity, failure, rebellion, and accomplishment. That it is sacred is the truth we stand for, and speak to, in art.

They speak as mimes, sign-makers, advertisers, announcers, skywriters, ring masters, and something of what these hold aloft crosses over. They give that look, question, annoy on purpose, tell one story and keep telling it until they stop needing to. This is youth to age, speaking, which begets trust, from which rises hope, for which there is no other evidence.

As for the kids who are stuck all year and can only take a chance one time, in June, well, once is all that can happen. For now. And for the kids who see they have made something they did not know they could make, those might see what possibility is. And this leads me to a final example of the difficult, inspiring reality of life in a school. This poem began with a desire to write about the moment when a girl said no to publishing her work. A draft began. Somewhere along the way, line 1, “At times kids write as if,” entered the poem. Now it was two poems. It had
enlarged. By the time I’d finished a real draft, I, working on a piece “about” how kids are in charge of their work, about what I’ve seen in this young person and her poetry, and about a girl who writes.

Kids Writing

i
At times kids write as if the person they are becoming has arrived, using words they will own if all goes well and they suffer the world to open their voices.

Most times, writing as kids, they lightning bug emptiness. Other times they lantern the dark they stand in. Each On is bright, and then they Off it.

ii
When I asked if we could print a girl’s poem about her mom, their fights, the war, the museum of skulls, lost brothers, not fighting back, fighting back, and her mother’s tears, she answered, “no,” with a shrug, and a look that dropped a gate before whatever sentence I’d had coming next.

Because of that “no,” I can’t quote from the student’s poem, but it speaks truth to history and her family. My poem is all praise. Much of what it knows about writing comes from having read poems like hers. As a teacher/poet, I’ve been writing about the world of my New York City high school for many years. As a follower of William Carlos Williams, I’ve long been interested in the local, in making meaning out of daily life. Williams wrote in his *Autobiography* about how his profession presented him with life in all its forms. Schools do the same, but Williams warned us, in “Spring and All,” not to “plagiarize nature.” It is not enough to set a scene on the page.

Poetry rises from what we perceive about the school we live in, about the world our school lives in, and from the questions and concerns we stand with as we live, and look out into the world. A well-known quote attributed to Pericles has it that “Just because you don’t take an interest in politics doesn’t mean politics won’t take an interest in you.” Teachers not only know the quote, they have felt the blows, heavy or subtle, that come with such interest. We know that we cannot just shut our classroom door and work. Power in its various forms is always there: fixing the schools, unloading a new curriculum, reforming the budget, attacking unions, and smacking “them teachers” where it hurts.

Trying to see the steps I’ve taken over decades of writing has taught much. Poems are what we, and the kids, try to make because they are worth making. And I see as I look at my own work, however successful it is, as the poems I have made widened and deepened, they have written me into the teacher I am. Poem writes teacher. Teachers do suffer the world—the city, its children—to open our voices, and we hope that all our voices, the kids and the adults, will stand tall, speaking truths into the conflicted air.

**Works Cited**


**Kip Zegers** is an English teacher at Hunter College High School in New York City. Two volumes of his teacher poems are *The Poet of Schools* (2013) and *The Pond in Room 318* (2015), both from Dos Madres Press of Loveland, Ohio. Kip became a member of NCTE in 2015.