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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

Great Georgia Teachers: Travis Ellington, Special Education, Toombs County High School By Peter Smagorinsky

With almost all discussion and policy about teacher evaluation centered on students' test scores, I'm writing a series of profiles of great Georgia teachers whose contributions are only partially measured (if at all) by their students' performances on standardized tests. Today I'm heading south, down to Toombs County High School, to feature Travis Ellington. I don't know what they're putting in those onions down in Vidalia these days, but if Travis is any indication, I hope they start passing them around in the Gold Dome the next time they legislate their next educational policy.

I'll first describe Travis's pathway as a student and teacher, then look into his extracurricular contributions, and finally focus on his work in the classroom. As you'll see, he's no ordinary guy. A remarkably high achiever throughout his life, he's perhaps doing his greatest work for the kids at Toombs County HS.

Travis is a native of Tifton, "The Friendly City," in Tift County, where he played football, competed in wrestling (or, as he says it, "rasslin'"), and threw the shot and discus in track. After graduating from Tift County HS in 1993, he attended a Mississippi community college for one year, then transferred to Greenville College, where he was a two-time All Conference offensive lineman on the football team. After stops in Vandilla, Illinois, and Tift, Irwin, and Swainsboro in Georgia, Travis settled in at Toombs County HS, along with his wife Tanisha and sons Levi and Whitt.

[In a previous blog essay](#), I asserted that teachers are the heart and soul of every school because they sustain it intellectually and emotionally over time, while students, parents, board members, and administrators come and go. Travis could be the poster boy for that claim. A lot of the most important achievements in schools take place outside the classroom. For Travis, extracurricular activities mean sports. He has coached football, wrestling, and track throughout his post-college career, and has been a spectacular success. He moved to Toombs when the county hired Swainsboro's head coach, who brought Travis along as a valued assistant. After starting as running backs coach, he was promoted to defensive coordinator and assistant head coach, all by age 37.

Can he coach? His peers think so: Travis has been named Region Wrestling Coach of the Year twice, Region Track Coach of the Year three times, Region Football Assistant Coach of the Year, and GHSA Track Coach of the Year after coaching Swainsboro to the state title in 2007—the only track state title in school history.

If you followed the Friday Night Lights TV show, and if you are familiar with Southern football, you might be thinking, Yeah, but he's a coach, not a teacher. Coach Taylor never taught a class down in Dillon, Texas. What do coaches have to do with great Georgia teachers?

I forgot to mention that Travis is the reigning Toombs County Teacher of the Year. At Greenville College, Travis originally aspired to coach and teach physical education. As a sophomore, however, he took a course in exceptional children, where he met an autistic boy who changed his life. Since then, he has wanted to help children with special needs become productive citizens with opportunities in life, just like kids on the normal part of the mental health spectrum.

Travis has realized this goal as a teacher of kids in need of special education, which is perhaps the part of the school curriculum where test scores have the least relevance to teaching effectiveness. Each child, he says, is "someone's prize possession. They have every right to get as much education as everybody else, and just to see them do well and grasp something is a real pleasure for me to see." The kids he works with probably get low test scores. By most current definitions, that makes Travis a bad, bad teacher. But he has chosen to spend his days helping kids who might have trouble counting change, or getting their shoes on the right foot, to navigate life with greater ease and satisfaction. To me, that's pretty great. Apparently, the people in Toombs County think so too.

Great teachers see every kid as "someone's prize possession," which is part of their passion for teaching. Every parent who watches his or her child walk into a school for the first time, or the thousandth time, hopes above all that each teacher recognizes the child's value and works hard to cultivate every ounce of potential. For some kids, that means training them for an Ivy League education. Travis's goals for his students are much more modest, but no less demanding or important.

I'll confess that I've got a few areas of crossover with Travis that help me appreciate the difficult work he does. First, we both are former athletes who believe in the role of sports for individual growth, a team orientation, and school spirit. We both have served as high school coaches (for me, track and basketball in Illinois) to teach new generations of kids how to play a sport, how to compete in healthy ways, how to respect people and institutions through athletics, and how to learn how to win and lose gracefully.

Travis and I also both teach at schools where the mascot is a Bulldog, and I suspect he can woof with the best of them.

Finally, we both care about people who are outside the normal range in their neurological makeup. Autism runs in my family, and I'm on the high-functioning range of Asperger's syndrome myself. I've spent a lot of time with people trying to manage autism, and understand how hard you have to work to get an incremental change. Those increments don't show up on tests, but they sure do register with the families of the people being helped.

Like a lot of teachers, Travis got into the profession because he wants to help people. He's especially admirable in that the people he wants to help the most will exhibit their learning in situations that most people will never see or hear about, and that will not provide him with merit pay in today's accountability climate. Rather, his happiness with his students' progress is largely a function of his personal relationship with them and their families, and his contributions to the life prospects of people whose achievements will be small, yet significant.

Travis personifies what makes school communities hang together and share a sense of common purpose—that is, he is the spirit in school spirit. If school were just about developing skills, it would have very little meaning to the people who populate it. What schools need is people who elevate the people around them by investing in their futures, which means attending to the whole child and providing a supportive environment for growth. What schools need is more people like Travis Ellington.