The Emergency Teacher

The Inspirational Story of a New Teacher in an Inner-City School

Christina Asquith

Foreword by Mark Bowden,
author of *Black Hawk Down*

Introduction by Dr. Harry K. Wong,
author of *The First Days of School*

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The Emergency Teacher

To my Mom and Dad

and

To Mark

Foreword

by Mark Bowden

It was eight years ago when Christina Asquith, my young colleague at *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* told me she was taking a leave from reporting and writing to teach a sixth-grade class at a troubled middle school in North Philadelphia.

It was a bold move. Christina was an extraordinarily talented and ambitious journalist, and in the two-year internship program she was completing at the paper, she was already launched in what had become a very competitive field. But Christina was passionately interested in education, which meant that she had both the itch to teach and a desire to write about it. She wasn't sure which would ultimately win out. If she decided to stay with teaching, this would be a good way to start, she told me, and if she decided not to teach, but instead to report and write about education, the firsthand experience would greatly inform her writing.

She got more than she bargained for.

Philadelphia's school system was so desperate for teachers in 1999 that they were willing—and this is only slightly stretching the truth—to take anyone. They had a program for "emergency" certification. Typically, teachers spend their college years preparing for a classroom and then log many hours working and observing alongside veteran instructors before taking over a class of their own. Christina had none of this. She even signed up too late for the one-week instruction course. The school district recruiter was unfazed.

"Can I really teach without any experience?" she asked.

"Believe me, we need you more than you need us," he said.

Christina was set before a class of sixth graders at Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle Magnet School, then in a massive gray stone building with all the charm of a nineteenth-century prison, on the corner of Eighth Street and Lehigh Avenue. Christina had thirty-three rambunctious early teens (most of

them mature well beyond any sixth-graders she had ever known), all of them fluent in Spanish but less so in English, from some of the most troubled neighborhoods in the city. There was minimal to no support from school administrators. The whole experience, from the existence of an "emergency" program to lure the naive and idealistic to the reality of Julia de Burgos, was like a bad joke. This heartbreakingly earnest, slender, blond, pretty, twenty-five-year-old woman from the suburbs of New Jersey was being offered up cynically. The job was hard to fill because no one wanted it. She had no lesson plans, no guidance, and, as it turned out, no books (she would eventually discover boxes of old, outdated, and undistributed books on her own). It was like someone was playing a trick on her. The bigger trick, of course, which Christina was quick to see for herself, was on the kids.

"I hate the fact that untrained teachers are being assigned here," said one veteran teacher at the school who remembers Christina and noted that the program that lured Christina is still in place today. More than ten novice teachers were handed classes this year alone. Only an experienced teacher at this school could fully comprehend the folly of the emergency certification program.

It's more than a folly; it's a disgrace. That and the general condition of public education in parts of Philadelphia and other big American cities is as clear a statement as society can make that children in certain neighborhoods—most of them Hispanic and black—simply don't matter. Christina's starting salary that year was $30,000—less than half of what her internship paid at the newspaper and $8,000 below the starting salary of her suburban counterparts, who were teaching at schools that were not hiring people off the streets to teach and who had, among other things, actual textbooks. In a society concerned about the escalating violence and lawlessness of inner-city neighborhoods, or a just society that paid salaries commensurate with the level of a job's difficulty, any teacher willing to tackle Julia de Burgos would be making top dollar.

Many of the untrained recruits take a quick look and flee. Christina watched as her fellow recruits dropped out, dumping their classes in midsemester on the teachers who stayed. She also saw something even worse: teachers who had given up long ago, but who stayed in place, going through the motions, waiting out the years to qualify for a pension. There were varying degrees of abdication, from those who simply threw their most difficult students out of class, leaving packs of unsupervised teens to roam the halls, to

one male teacher who simply ignored his students altogether, spending class periods reading the newspaper at his desk. "Failure is not an option," the school principal had intoned impressively in a staff meeting at the start of the year, which sounded firm and inspirational, and turned out to be literally true, as teachers were encouraged to simply falsify grades on exams and report cards in order to meet assigned goals.

Christina was tougher than that. She battled her way through the full year, never more grateful for her fluent command of Spanish, buying books and supplies for the children out of her own thin wallet—her parents helped with the rent—and finding a small network of skilled teachers inside the school who inspired and counseled her. Along the way she fell in love with her students.

I visited her class midway through that year. I had sent three of my children to public schools in Philadelphia, but nothing prepared me for Julia de Burgos. The only thing that struck me as normal about the school was her class. It was warm and boisterous and fun. There were kids in the back of the room who were off in their own worlds, and there were brassy kids clearly unconvinced that being in school was worth their while, but Christina had the full attention of a core group of smart, focused, genuinely curious children eager to learn. As I left that day, Christina asked me what I thought, and I didn't have a terribly coherent response. I was shocked, but I didn't want to jump to any conclusions—I didn't know if the herds of wild children in the halls were a temporary problem or the status quo—and I didn't want to discourage her by being too critical. I told her that, at the very least, she had a great story to write. I was moved by her courage and accomplishment.

I also encouraged her decision to keep notes and to think about shaping the experience into a book, which, much to my surprise, she did. Here is the remarkable result. I was lucky enough to be one of this book's first readers, and I love it for reasons apart from its startling revelations about a deeply troubled school system. It would be a good enough book if that was all it did, but it does much more. It captures Christina's heart, the sheer tenacity and decency she showed in refusing to abandon her idealism. In it are portraits of teachers both heroic and appalling, and of administrators right out of some black comedy about bureaucracy. Most captivating, though, are the loving stories of her students whose sweetness, helplessness, and neediness is heartbreaking. Her battle to be the teacher they deserved is inspiring. It is a fascinating story of

stubborn ingenuity and courage, and as warm and revealing a portrait of a troubled urban school as you will ever read.

Christina left after that year, after months of painful deliberation. I know how hard the decision was for her. She had taught herself how to control a class and to teach in the worst of circumstances, and she knew the island of sanity and learning she had created for her students would very likely disappear once she was gone. She went on to earn a masters degree in education at the London School of Economics, and then covered the war in Iraq as a stringer for the *Christian Science Monitor* and other newspapers, writing about education issues in that war-torn place.

Since she left, Julia de Burgos has moved into an impressive new building at Fourth and Lehigh, but still suffers the same problems. Classes remain very challenging and overcrowded; there are fewer classroom supplies than there were seven years ago; teachers are still quitting (both those who walk away and those who stay in place); and wild children still roam the halls, preying upon the kids who are trying to learn, and occasionally their teachers—in one recent and heavily publicized case, a substitute filling in for an "emergency" teacher who quit was assaulted so severely that he landed in the hospital.

I hope *The Emergency Teacher* is a wake-up call. The only real remedy for challenging urban schools is not to recruit brave volunteers like Christina, but to offer salaries that equal or exceed those paid in the suburbs. Why would anyone who is not a saint take a harder job that pays significantly less? Schools like Julia de Burgos don't need novices, even ingenuous and dedicated ones like Christina; they need the most resourceful, experienced, and dedicated teachers money can buy.

Introduction

By Dr. Harry K. Wong

The statistics are staggering and hard to imagine in any other industry: Almost a third of all new teachers leave the classroom after three years, and close to 50 percent leave after five years. Each resignation can cost the school district upward of $50,000. The turnover is a primary cause of the chaos in underachieving school systems like Detroit where less than 25 percent of high school students graduate on time—if ever.

How can a team of teachers and school staff prepare, plan, and sustain a functioning, effective school program with such instability?

"The exit of teachers from the profession and the movement of teachers to better schools are costly phenomena, both for the students who lose the value of being taught by an experienced teacher, and for the schools and districts, which must recruit and train their replacements," says renowned University of Pennsylvania education professor Richard Ingersoll.

"There is a growing consensus among researchers and educators that the single most important factor in determining student performance is the quality of his or her teachers," he says.

In *The Emergency Teacher* we have a captivating case study of a new teacher's experience illustrating why so many are driven from the profession. This makes the book an excellent new-teacher training tool. Fast-paced and well-documented, *The Emergency Teacher* gives names, faces, and emotion to those alarming statistics. This true story relates the experience of young Philadelphia journalist Christina Asquith after she quits her newspaper job to become an emergency certified teacher. She is sent into the toughest school in the city, Julia de Burgos Bilingual Middle Magnet School, and assigned to be the sixth grade teacher for English, social studies, and reading.

Christina was just like so many of the new teachers I meet and train each year. Full of energy and determined, she did not go into teaching to make money. She dreamed of giving low-income children a chance in life through education. She writes of her motivation to quit her newspaper job and teach:

> Most of my friends were setting off for well-paying jobs with Internet start-ups or glamorous new magazines. I wanted to "make a difference in a child's life," as the Philadelphia Department of Education recruitment posters promised. I felt like the failing inner-city schools were an injustice that I should stand against, not only with words but also with real action.

Her idealism and high expectations are so common among new teachers. In the book I've written with my wife, Rosemary, *The First Days of School,* I call this stage "Fantasy." All teachers go through it. Christina watched movies like *Lean on Me* and *Stand and Deliver* and fantasized about rescuing a group of students through sheer will, ingenuity, and pluck. Her enthusiasm ought to be applauded, but enthusiasm is no substitute for knowledge and experience. So often, though, these positive expectations collide with the sober realities of the job, and teachers move from the fantasy stage into what I call "Survival."

Within weeks, Christina realized that she was wholly unprepared to actually teach, and she received no support from her administration and few supplies. The honeymoon period between her and her students wore off, and her disorganization made the students anxious and rebellious. Here, she describes the desperation both she and Ms. Rohan, her team teacher, were feeling by October:

> We had nothing to teach with and six hours of classroom time to fill. We were two untrained, inexperienced teachers about to invent their own sixth grade from scratch, without even textbooks. We could barely keep our heads above water; how did we build a lifeboat?

Induction Versus Mentoring Programs

The Emergency Teacher does a powerful job of documenting a problem widespread in public school systems: the lack of trained teachers and its effect on student learning. Christina illustrates one of the major reasons why new teach-

ers don't succeed in making their dreams come true: They lack support from the school administration.

All school districts should offer a structured induction program to welcome, introduce, and give ongoing training to new teachers, but few do. Many new teachers, like Christina, are tossed classroom keys and told to "sink or swim." As we know, too many sink. The fear, vulnerability, insecurity, and isolation that Christina experienced are typical. Proper teacher training and institutionalized, ongoing support could save new teachers from a disastrous year, and retain them for another year.

The administrators at Julia De Burgos Bilingual Middle School in Philadelphia seemed to treat the new teachers as an afterthought. Either they were too busy running around trying to organize the school, or they had been worn down by all the new teachers coming and going, so they treated Christina with cynicism.

When Christina did ask about training, she was given only a mentor. Giving new teachers a mentor is a common mistake that afflicts underperforming schools. A mentor is not induction; these two terms are not synonymous. Induction is a structured process used by districts to train, support, and retain new teachers. It is a highly organized and comprehensive staff development process involving many people and components, and typically continues as a sustained process for two to five years. Mentoring is important, but it is only one component of the induction process.

In this book, Christina describes how she was ignored by the other teachers on her first day and how her mentor show little interest in helping her become a better teacher, but want Christina just to sign her time sheet so she could receive payment! In far too many instances, a mentor is simply a veteran teacher who has been haphazardly selected by the principal and assigned to a new teacher, resulting in a "blind date," as Jon Saphier (2001) calls it in his book *Beyond Mentoring.* Sharon Feiman-Nemser, in her 1996 *ERIC Digest* article "Teacher Mentoring: A Critical Review" writes that after twenty years of experimenting with mentoring as a process for helping new teachers, few comprehensive studies exist to validate its effectiveness.

People crave connection. New teachers want more than a job. They want hope. They want to contribute to a group. They want to make a difference. Induction programs provide that connection because they are structured around a learning community where new and veteran teachers treat each other with

respect and all contributions are valued. Christina successfully made friends with the other teachers who supported her professional development, but there was little leadership from the administration, which ought to have had the most invested in keeping her.

Christina also had a poor relationship with her school's principal. Rarely will a college education class prepare a teacher for the emotional stress this can add to a teacher's many other hurdles. We watch her grapple with the idiosyncrasies of her superiors, and see how she took solace in the friendship and support of a group of teachers who socialized together each Friday afternoon. Christina's poignant description of her isolation will resonate with and offer comfort to other new teachers, but isolation is a new teacher's worst enemy. It is emotionally taxing and prevents teachers from sharing successful strategies that benefit the students. I always tell teachers: "Steal! Steal lesson plans, classroom management tricks, successful teaching strategies, and whatever else you can." Christina wisely did that, and we are happy to go with her as she builds up her classroom.

All administrators should take heed of Christina's experience and look to it to understand how they can offer more support to their new teachers. In my 2003 book *New Teacher Induction: How to Train, Support, and Retain New Teachers*, my coauthor Annette Breaux and I discuss step-by-step how school districts can set up a support program, a recommendation based on extensive research including thirty successful induction programs from other schools. Had Christina's school had an induction program like the ones we describe, her experience would have been very different. If you are an administrator, ask yourself: "How do we support and retain our new teachers?" If you are a new teacher or are considering teaching, I encourage you to ask your school administrators: "Do you have an ongoing induction program, and what do you do to support new teachers?"

If they don't have a good answer, try to look elsewhere. A good induction program can include a pre-school-year workshop, a welcome center, a bus tour of the neighborhood, study groups, mentors and coaches, portfolios and videos, demonstration classrooms, administrative support, and learning circles. It should last for at least three years.

New teachers come into the profession having invested years of their lives and tens of thousands of dollars with the vision of making a difference in the

lives of young people. It is a crime when they are just thrown into a classroom with no training or support.

Managing a Classroom

The second important lesson to be learned from *The Emergency Teacher* is the importance of classroom management as opposed to discipline. Whether emergency certified teachers or graduates from the college of education, too few teachers grasp the critical difference. Therein lies the key to their success.

In the beginning of her school year, Christina was typical of the millions of devoted and committed teachers who fret about their next day's lessons. Each evening, she asked herself, "What am I going to teach tomorrow?" So, she planned what she would cover or what activity she would do in class the next day. She thought this was teaching because most teachers cover or do activities first, then they discipline when things go wrong—and when things did go wrong, Christina spent the next evening again fretting and wondering what she could do to get the students to pay attention to their lessons, and thereby have fewer behavior problems in the classroom. She asked that perennial but incorrect question: "What can I do to motivate my students?"—thinking that motivated students will be more attentive and better behaved. The next day, however, the cycle repeated itself, and Christina continued to cover and discipline.

The problem, Christina later realized, was that she was not spending any time managing her classrooms. She was reacting to problems as they arose. So many teachers fall into this trap. If classroom management procedures were taught, almost all class discipline problems would disappear, and more time in the classroom could be spent on learning. *The problem lies with teachers not knowing the difference between classroom management and classroom discipline.*

When you go shopping, you expect the store to be well managed. If it is not, you're likely to say, "Does anyone around here know what they are doing? I could run this place better." Shopping in a well-run store means you expect the place to have a pleasant ambiance conducive to shopping. The temperature is perfect, the aisles are clean, the merchandise is well organized, and the personnel are inviting.

An effective shopkeeper does not manage the store by posting a sign outside the front door with the store's policy telling you how you are to behave inside the store, then running around the store taking away privileges from customers who do not behave and giving perks to those who follow the rules. No restaurant, office, cruise ship, or church is managed in this manner; yet this is how some teachers "manage" their classrooms—with consequences and rewards.

In the late fall, Christina read *The First Days of School* and began to understand the importance of managing a classroom, using the many techniques in the book to instill order. Until that point, Christina had been waiting until a problem arose and then condemning the infraction. For example, each time certain students wanted to throw away paper, they stood up, took a dramatic basketball shot, and bowed as the rest of the class cheered. Christina either admonished the student or pretended she didn't see the infraction. However, after reading *The First Days of School,* she learned that the better solution was to have a procedure in place for throwing away garbage—and to teach that procedure and practice it. This strategy can apply to all areas of the classroom. Christina describes how her class turned around once she started implementing procedures and classroom management strategies:

> For a week I continued to devote all my energies to classroom management. Each morning we reviewed the class procedures and did exercises on them. We practiced lining up to leave for lunch. We practiced throwing away garbage. We ran drills on pencil sharpening and what to do if you had a question. One morning I devoted an hour to practicing passing back papers. My class didn't turn around all of a sudden and completely, as in that movie *Dangerous Minds* when Michelle Pfeiffer teaches her students a karate kick and then suddenly they're her angels. Nor was there one big meaningful moment when my students and I finally "got it," as in *Lean on Me*. The spitballs returned the following day, in fact. But once I was consistent with teaching the procedures, the Rodolfos and the Ronnys left the dark side and joined my team.

Such a dramatic turnaround in Christina's class illustrates that with the right teaching strategies, and good support and training from the school administration, all teachers can succeed in any classroom.

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A Short History

It is a free school system, it knows no distinction of rich and poor . . . it throws open its doors and spreads the table of its bounty for all the children of the state. Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery.

—Horace Mann, Secretary of Education, Massachusetts, 1837–1848

On a blustery November afternoon in 1905, in a working-class Philadelphia neighborhood, dignitaries rode trains into Broad Street Station to witness the opening of one of the first public high schools in the nation. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, then head of Princeton University, led a procession of bigwigs including Pennsylvania Governor Samuel Whitaker Pennypacker and the CEOs of railroad companies, transatlantic steamship concerns, and carpet mills—business luminaries of the great Iron Age—to the corner of Eighth and Lehigh avenues.

Inside the auditorium of the new school, called the Northeast, distinguished guests took the podium in top hats and canes and declared the school a symbol of democracy, freedom, and equal opportunity, all distinctively American virtues. The major newspaper of the day splayed the event across the front page: A FREE HIGH SCHOOL FOR WORKING CLASS BOYS? This high school was headline news.

"We want men of capacity who are able to turn their hands to anything. This capacity is one characteristic of real Americanism," Woodrow Wilson said at the opening ceremony. "Benjamin Franklin was such a man as this, who