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Phone: 512-914-5998 Fax: 512-892-1781; <mailto:report@robertleos.com>

Back to School! ***Jenna Bonanno, Teacher*** ***By Robert H. Leos***

Jenna Bonanno is one of millions of teachers across this country who have been planning the first day of school for several weeks now. As the new school year gets underway, Ms. Bonanno and so many others dedicated to the teaching profession, begin the challenging task of planning and delivering instruction to their students. In addition to their planning and teaching responsibilities, today's teachers have responsibilities associated with high stakes testing, No Child Left Behind, and the paperwork and reporting required by their local school districts. Parent-teacher conferences, ARD meetings, professional development, and addressing crises throughout the year are all part of the deal.

Teaching is a challenging profession. It is particularly challenging in special education, Jenna's area of specialization. According to a 2006 report by the Texas Center for Educational Research, special education teachers are in short supply—excellent special education teachers are in even shorter supply. The report cites a number of reasons why school districts find it challenging to retain good special education teachers, including the legal complexities of working with special education students; the tremendous amount of paperwork; job stress due to the conflicting responsibilities of the job and work overload; and lower salaries and benefits relative to other fields outside of education. Despite the difficulties, teachers like Jenna Bonanno recharge each summer and re-dedicate the next nine or ten months to planning, teaching, and serving the students assigned to her class.

We met at Jenna Bonanno's home in San Antonio, Texas, where she spoke about the teaching profession and her advice to young men and women considering a career in teaching.



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ROBERT LEOS: *I'm certain that you were aware that teaching is an incredibly challenging profession. What made you decide to go into teaching?*

JENNA BONANNO: To be perfectly honest, I had to take care of my daughter and myself. I thought it would be a good stable job, with holidays off, weekends off, and some time off in the summer. That would give us those times together and I wouldn't have to search for day care during the times when she would be out of school.

ROBERT LEOS: *You also made the decision to go into special education, an area of teaching that some claim is the most challenging of all positions. In the words of a popular television psychologist, what were you thinking?*

JENNA BONANNO: In terms of going into special education, I believe there is a serious lack of great special education teachers. There had been quite a bit of babysitting going on the special education classrooms. Things have changed now that all students, including special education students, are tested.

ROBERT LEOS: *That hasn't always been the case, has it? There were more exemptions in the past.*

JENNA BONANNO: Prior to the changes in assessment policies, schools would try to get students into special education so they wouldn't have to take the test. Now everyone is tested, life skills students too. All scores from special education students are calculated in with the rest of the students. Special education teachers now have to step up

and produce. Before they could get away with babysitting.

ROBERT LEOS: *What about students who are monolingual Spanish speakers?*

JENNA BONANNO: Some students can take the Spanish test if they are Spanish speakers. They can take the test in Spanish but will have to take the test in English after a maximum of three years in bilingual education. I had a student with seizures and a feeding tube and I had to administer the test to her.

ROBERT LEOS: *Is your classroom a self-contained environment? In other words, are you with the same students all day or do they have other teachers?*

JENNA BONANNO: You try to mainstream the students as much as possible. They will leave my classroom for physical education, music, computer classes, and library. My district's policy is to include them in science and history as well. They will go into those classes and I will be there with them. Inclusion looks great on paper, but in reality, it has its down sides.

ROBERT LEOS: *How many students will you have in your class this year?*

JENNA BONANNO: I will have from ten to twelve students this year.

ROBERT LEOS: *You mentioned that there are some down sides to inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms—mainstreaming. Can you talk a bit about the down sides?*

JENNA BONANNO: There are many down sides. Students will get bored; boredom leads to behaviors; behaviors

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become distractions for other students in class. You then have other students who are benefitting because, socially, it is better to have the special education students in with the others. I think it is more productive if you just have one to three students with moderate to high-need disability in the classroom, with support.

ROBERT LEOS: *Do parents get very involved in school activities?*

JENNA BONANNO: It depends a great deal on where the district is located. Some parents are very involved and others not so much. Much of it depends on the perspective of the parents. Some expect that when the students are in school, it is the teacher's role to take care of them. Others have so many outside issues going on. Consequently, they are not as involved.

ROBERT LEOS: *Most teachers are required to begin their school year a week or two prior to students arriving. What types of activities are you involved in during that time?*

The setup of your classroom can interfere with your procedures. You need to know your procedures so that you can set up the classroom to match those procedures. If you have never set up a classroom, you need to take at least a week and make adjustments. I moved my classroom around three times this year before I got it to where I knew it would function.

ROBERT LEOS: *What do you feel will be your greatest challenge throughout this school year?*

JENNA BONANNO: The greatest challenge is the amount of time that I am pulled away from my students, for

meetings and for training. It throws off the balance of the classroom, especially with the students that I teach.

Sometimes we are required to be in training for three days at a time. When we come back to the classroom, it's almost as if you have to start over. You might have a substitute and your lesson plans on paper, but then you realize that the lessons were not being executed the way you would like them to be. That is the biggest challenge for me.



JENNA BONANNO

Special education teacher, East Central Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas.

B.A. Political Science, Incarnate Word University, San Antonio, Texas.

M.Ed., Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.

Jenna Bonanno has taught high school, junior high and middle school, and is currently teaching intermediate level students. She works with students with low incidence disabilities—students who make up 3% of special education classes.

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ROBERT LEOS: *What advice would you give to a young man or woman interested in the teaching profession?*

JENNA BONANNO: I would recommend the alternative certification route to teaching. The reason is that a student can get a business degree, for example, and use that degree if he or she gets tired of teaching, has career burnout, or just needs a break. If you go through a degree program in education, you might decide after three years that you need to do something different. You would only have the teaching degree to fall back on. There are a limited number of jobs for individuals with teaching degrees. If you have a degree in marketing, however, you have that to fall back on. That's another avenue for you.

A student who is majoring in English or math who feels that he or she would like to teach, should find out the number of credits in the subject that are needed. The requirement in teaching is to be highly qualified in the subject area. They should take those extra credits in English or math so that when they go through the alternative certification program, they will not have to go back and take them. I think that gives you two avenues instead of just one.

I would highly recommend that you substitute teach while in college. When you go through an education program, you don't get into the classroom much until you student teach. A student teacher might find himself or herself in an elementary classroom, surrounded by all these kids wishing they had chosen high school certification. By that time, they just want to graduate. You don't want to go back and take more classes at that time so you are stuck with a degree that you really don't want and you burn out before you even start. I would encourage students interested in teaching to substitute teach in special education, in elementary education, in high school, in a range of subjects. That way when you do your alternative certification, you can go into the area that you really want to go into.



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-Jenna Bonanno-

The report quoted in the introduction is "Texas Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education." Prepared for Education Service Center Region 4 and the Texas Education Agency by Fanny Caranikas-Walker, Ph.D. and Kelly S. Shapley, Ph.D., Texas Center for Educational Research and Molly Cordeau, Ed.D., Education Service Center Region 4. May 2006.