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The teacher

By [Rob Eshman](#)

Mickey Palmer is 87 years old and living in a cozy home by Elizabeth Lake, near Palmdale. She moved there 25 years ago when she retired from teaching sixth grade.

When she called me at The Journal, I tried to do the math on how old that made her when she was my teacher at Encino Elementary School in 1972. The answer didn't pop into my head.

Math, Mrs. Palmer reminded me, was never my best subject.

But Mickey Palmer was my best teacher in a school that boasted so many good ones.

I hadn't spoken to her since graduation, so we both went full speed down memory lane.

"It was a really good school," I said.

"It was a great school," she said.

This was the early 1970s. Public schools were far more "Mad Men" than "Mad Max." Encino Elementary bubbled over with eager, overachieving kids, moms who filled PTA meetings and teachers who were dedicated to helping us excel.

The same was true at the schools I attended subsequently, Portola Junior High and Birmingham High. It's inconceivable today that our parents didn't spend a minute figuring out which school within a one-hour drive of their homes would be best for their children: It was the local public one, of course.

It takes a tremendous act of will not to wax nostalgic about the days when families took good, accessible public education for granted. Not only do we parents spend much of our waking life trying to find the perfect school for our perfect children, we then spend the rest of our

time -- if the school is private, or Jewish -- wondering how we'll pay for it. For too many of us, public school is no longer an option. In 2006, just 42 percent of California's students scored proficient or above in English, and only 40 percent of kids are at grade level or above in math.

Curing what ails these schools is a complex task. The national education debate, to the extent that there is one this election season, will not make or break either candidate, though people routinely rank education near the top of their national concerns. John McCain has said he wants an education policy that includes "everything that works." Vouchers, charter schools, Head Start -- all of the above.

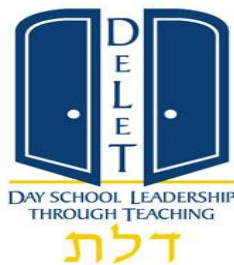
Barack Obama is for almost all of the above -- he opposes vouchers -- plus he has said he actually wants to fund these options and throw in early childhood education and good teachers' bonuses.

The policy differences aren't huge -- you could lock the two men in a room at snack time, and they'd probably come out with a compromise by lunch. The big question is which candidate will succeed in seeing his vision through.

But anybody who's gone through school can tell you the most immediate cure for a bad class isn't a president, it's a teacher. Society has little control over parents and their children, but we have actual leverage when it comes to recruiting, training and supporting teachers.

Mrs. Palmer was a great teacher. But she is by no means the last great teacher.

Schools have deteriorated, parent involvement has evaporated, funding priorities have gone elsewhere, like Iraq, but good teachers keep showing up for work.



One solution was the DeLeT program, a fellowship that recruits and trains high-caliber Jewish day school teachers .

Over the past month, I've met, serendipitously, three of them. I ran into Ellie Herman at a bat mitzvah last weekend. When I last met her, she was a successful television writer. She told me she walked away from that career to get her teaching credential.

"It's something I always wanted to do," she said, "and it was time."

This week Herman begins teaching at a charter high school in South Los Angeles.

Wendy Madnick, a mother of two boys, decided on a mid-life career switch, too. After a rich professional life in journalism -- including work for this paper -- she got her credential and now teaches teens at Taft High School. I saw her at the same bat mitzvah, and she couldn't have been more excited for September to come.

"Teens are so rewarding," she enthused. "They're so interesting." And she hadn't even had a drink.

Adina Ackerman, who is 26, first taught Judaica at Temple Israel of Hollywood's day school, then moved into the public school system. She will be one of four teachers opening a new charter middle school in Mid-Wilshire focused on social justice (see story, p. 22).

"We start with sixth grade," she said, as she laid out the vision of New Los Angeles Charter School with the bubbling enthusiasm of, I guess, a sixth-grader. "And we build from there."

These women are all accomplished, all capable of succeeding in fields that are more remunerative than public education.

That they choose to teach, and excel at it, and find satisfaction and purpose in it, is no doubt mysterious to a lot of people.

But both as a community, and as a society, we can do more to encourage and support the people who make that choice.

One simple step is to make it easier for professionals to

jump into public school classrooms.

A model for this? Jewish days schools.

Faced with a shortage of top-quality teachers, Jewish days schools here sought ways to streamline qualified professionals into the teaching profession.

One solution was the DeLeT program, a fellowship offered in Los Angeles that recruits and trains high-caliber Jewish day school teachers in 13 months.

"If you follow the roads that people travel to become a teacher in Jewish schools," Gil Graff, the executive director of the Bureau of Jewish Education told me, "I'm sure you would find a multiplicity of directions, it's not just one straight path. You need to make it easy."

Los Angeles Unified should take a good look at DeLeT.

Mickey Palmer said she doesn't miss teaching -- she put in a quarter century. But she does miss running the school paper, The Encino Echo. When I was her student, she made me the editor.

You never know where a good teacher will lead you.

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