
Experience v. Education: What makes a good teacher?

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With an educational background that includes taking shop classes for two years in high school and certification in Auto Service Technology at a trade school in Arizona, Merle Saunders worked for three years in the automotive field until a softball accident left him with a broken wrist and an opportunity to try his hand at teaching.

"I love the interaction with the kids," Saunders said. "I'm making a difference in their lives that will last a lifetime."

Saunders has taught auto technology courses at Vale High School in Oregon for 26 years. Oregon state law allows individuals to teach on a special one year vocational certificate with three years of work experience in the field in which they are teaching. Saunders, like all Oregon educators, is required to continue his education by taking 120 hours of training and educational classes to maintain his certificate every five years.

Saunders has a long list of awards to evidence the kind of educator he has been for the last 26 years including the 2001 Milken Educator Award that included a cash prize of \$25,000 and induction into the National Teacher's Hall of Fame in Washington, D.C. last year.

"I really don't know why people consider me a good teacher. I've received many awards in my career, so I guess (they) kind of look up to me as the example now," Saunders said. "We work our tails off; I have very high expectations for my students."

Saunders divides his teaching between classroom lectures and hands-on shop time and attributes his success to the fact that he is very organized, consistent and has good rapport with his students.

"Education is extremely important and I preach that to all my students," Saunders said. "I tell them that I am the exception

and if at all possible they should definitely consider more education whether at a trade school or a four year university."

According to Saunders, many of his automotive students go on to get an associate or bachelor's degrees or attend trade schools, while others begin working in the field immediately after high school graduation.

"I also consider it a success when some figure out that it is not a field they want to pursue, while they are in high school and their education is basically free," Saunders said. "They learn this is not what they want to do and get into something else, but at least they have the skills to do basic maintenance on their vehicles."

Saunders said that although he is limited in where he can teach, he does not plan on getting a college degree and does not think that he is deficient as an instructor.

"I think we teach the way we've learned and we teach from our experiences," Saunders said. "I believe there is a definite advantage for educators who have been in the industry or have been in a profession other than education. One of the perceived problems in public education is a lot of teachers and instructors have never been in the 'real world', they went to school for 12, 14, or 16 years then got a job at a school... many of them haven't ever earned a living outside of a school setting."
