

Substantial Disruption



It's A Wonderful Life: Teachers' Edition

By Mike Tully

If you were not around, would things go to hell? If you were not on the scene, would there be chaos, dysfunction, and violence? Would the world suffer in your absence? Would your community? If your steady hand and calming voice were not available, would those who depend on them degenerate into victimization and abuse? Are you that important? Could you really be that necessary?

If you're a teacher, the answer is yes. Don't take my word for it: listen to the Governor of Kentucky, who regards teachers as a bulwark between society's children and disaster. The Governor was concerned when thousands of Kentucky teachers gathered in a mass protest at the state capital, part of a national *cri de guerre* against penurious (primarily Republican) governance that mortgages the future by starving schools and cheating our kids. The teachers were not in the classroom that day, and Governor Matt Bevin panicked. Who was taking care of the children?

"Do you know how many hundreds of thousands of children today were left home alone?" said the Governor, answering his own question. He [told a gathering of reporters](#) what evils the teachers' absence would spawn. "I guarantee you somewhere in Kentucky today a child was sexually assaulted that was left at home because there was nobody there to watch them," he declared, without irony or evidence. "I guarantee you somewhere today a child was physically harmed or ingested poison because they were home alone because a single parent didn't have any money to take care of them."

Democrats as well as his fellow Republicans promptly informed Bevin that he was conducting a head-first exploration of his own digestive tract. The Governor then [fumbled his attempt at an apology](#) by stating, "Clearly a tremendous amount of people did not fully appreciate what it was that I was communicating." He's not really a donkey's hindquarters, you see – he's just under-appreciated. Presumably, the good people of Kentucky will express their appreciation at the ballot box next year.

While the Governor intended his remarks as criticism of the teachers and their job action, he could not have conferred a more powerful endorsement of their value. Is there higher praise than hearing that you are indispensable? If the Governor believes one day without teachers would lead to kids being sexually assaulted and otherwise harmed, what would the world be like without teachers? Bevin is an accidental [Clarence Odbody](#) to the [George Baileys](#) of the teaching profession, assuring them they are not only valued, but priceless. The Bedford Falls without George Bailey was a dismal place where good men became derelicts, honorable men became bullies, a child died unnecessarily and integrity was abandoned. Absent one decent man, the little town degenerated into a flashing hell-hole of gambling, drunkenness and depravity. Without George Bailey, Bedford Falls boiled over and became Pottersville.

There's not much of [Frank Capra](#)'s America left, but there are still George Baileys among us, many of whom dig into their own pockets for school supplies, the occasional meal for a kid who would otherwise go without, maybe even items of clothing for the less fortunate among their charges. That's before they work after dinner grading papers and exams, preparing lesson plans, and contacting parents who need to talk to them. If you want a 40-hour, 9 to 5 work experience, don't go into teaching.

Unfortunately, there are Henry Potters among us as well, political leaders who view public education as an expense, not an investment. They claim they can cut taxes without affecting educational quality and, when their schemes fail, send the collateral damage to prison. Bevins is a Henry Potter. So is Arizona Governor Doug Ducey, the Cold Stone Con Man who tried to buy teachers off with a one percent pay raise, then ignored their marches and demonstrations until he caved in and promised a raise he doesn't know how to pay for. [Arizona teachers aren't buying it](#). Even if Ducey finds a way to pay for his promised raises (nine percent immediately, followed by two five percent increases by 2020), there is no guarantee Arizona's Legislature and its Potterish Republicans will go along. And neither Ducey nor the Legislature have addressed class sizes, outdated books, failing roofs and plumbing systems, and the need to upgrade technology in Arizona's schools. They say nothing about adequate pay for counselors, monitors, bus drivers, custodians, maintenance workers and clerical staff. The teachers intend to hold their feet to the fire until they do.

Perhaps teachers in Arizona and elsewhere can parlay Bevins' fears into some good, old-fashioned political blackmail. Remember the famous "[National Lampoon](#)" cover showing a frightened dog with a gun pointed to its head and a caption that read, "If You Don't Buy This Magazine We'll Kill This Dog?" How about, "Pay decent wages and fix our schools or we'll walk out and leave your kids to their own devices?" Governor Bevins said that will result in children being sexually assaulted, exposed to drugs and even poisoned. Nice kids you have there – hope nothing bad happens when we're not around. Engage the Henry Potters at their level; let them know who they're dealing with. Tell them: Don't spit into the wind, don't run with scissors, don't pet stray dogs, don't tug on Superman's cape and never, never try to lowball the people who care for, instruct and inspire your kids.

There's no future in that.