

The Columbus Dispatch

EDUCATION

'I'm still loving it': Dublin teacher reflects on over 30 years teaching after state award



Cole Behrens

Columbus Dispatch

Updated May 6, 2024, 4:56 p.m. ET

Editor's note: This story has been updated to reflect that Kucinski previously worked for Newark City Schools in Ohio.

For Steve Kucinski, teaching is a calling — one that he still loves 30 years later.

"The thought that each day you have the chance to influence kids — I've always felt like it's an important job, even on days that for me didn't feel like a good day," Kucinski said.

Kucinski is a Dublin Coffman High School English teacher and was recently named one of [Ohio's 2024 Teachers of the Year](#) for his excellence in the field of educating and inspiring students.

"It might have been my worst day, but it's somebody's best day," Kucinski said of his approach to teaching. "So, I tried to examine my career day-by-day like that."

Kucinski looks back on over 30 years teaching kids in a rapidly changing society

Kucinski began teaching as an assistant teacher at Dublin Coffman in 1993, and then went to Newark City Schools in Ohio to teach until 1999 when he returned to

Dublin Coffman High School. In his more than 30 years as a teacher, he has seen the field of education totally change.

"There's been a lot of changes, where I would say we're struggling to figure out where we are now as far as what kids need and what, who's, what's the best way to deliver it to them," he said.

When he first started teaching, the focus for teachers was less on working collaboratively with the students and was more about learning "This is what you're doing. Do it this way. Do it well, and you're good" — which Kucinski called "doing school."

However, after researching innovative teaching strategies about 10 years ago, Kucinski said he believed there are better ways to teach kids, especially considering all the new pressures teens face at home, work or with school extracurriculars.

"I just started to feel like there's so much more I could get out of (the students) — it may be more work for me, it may be a little uncomfortable — but it was fun to me and reignited my desire to get more out of them."

Authenticity in education and forming connections with your students

Part of the secret sauce to great teaching, Kucinski said, is engaging authentically with your students. And that may mean working collaboratively with them, offering them choices and helping them actually take something from an English curriculum.

For example, on his wall was student artwork from books like *Animal Farm* — the assignment was to visualize what they had taken away as a theme from a book they had read and explain what the drawings meant.

"They're tougher to do for the students meaning they take more time, but they usually enjoy them," Kucinski said. "Truly it was not this 'You're all writing this essay topic,' why as a teacher would I want that?"

However, he said that in 2024, educators are finding that it is harder than ever to connect with students and engage them in learning, or even school activities like pajama day that are meant to be fun.

"It's not just COVID backlash. It's not just social media — It's there's some strange combination now that's got students kind of in a fog," Kucinski said.

And the need for authenticity reaches new heights in a world with artificial intelligence that can do homework for you. While teachers across the country grapple with how to handle students abusing AI, Kucinski said he wants to create assignments for students that are either impossible to fake with AI, or one a student wouldn't even want to cheat on.

"You could go, you know, back to paper pencil, you can go to presentations, I'm trying to more say: 'I really want to know what you think,'" Kucinski said. "I want to know what you think, and you really can't be wrong as long as you explain yourself."

'I'm still really loving it.'

Kucinski was among 11 teachers selected as the Ohio Department of Education Teachers of the Year from across the state. Of his time meeting Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, he said he felt like he was actually being listened to as an educator.

"As educators, I think that's always a complaint is nobody understands what we're doing or wants to hear from us," he said. "I think educators can do more to speak up when asked, or to get into influential positions if they want change made."

Aside from more than 30 years teaching, Kucinski also holds a doctorate in educational psychology from Ohio State University, where he serves as [an adjunct lecturer](#). He also published a [young adult novel](#) and a guide to the Ohio Graduation Test.

Kucinski encourages new and growing teachers to remain focused on the positives of the jobs, despite increasing challenges like politicization of schools or the

financial challenges many districts face because of failing levies.

"I'm still really loving it," Kucinski said of his career. "So even after getting closer to where I can officially retire, I'm still really enjoying what I'm doing."

@Colebehr_report

Cbehrens@dispatch.com