

FROM THE EDITOR

Legendary Quality

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ne of this job's perks is that you get to encounter fascinating people, from the superintendent's secretary in a small school district to a world-famous journalist, from the school board member who loves punk music to the retired English teacher whose first book won the Pulitzer Prize.

Two of those people—Walter Cronkite and Frank McCourt—died within two days of each other in mid-July. I was fortunate to interview both—Cronkite in 2004 and McCourt in 2005—while working for the magazine. (Following their deaths, we reprinted the interviews on *ASBJ's* blog, *The Leading Source*, <http://leadingsource.asbj.com>).

Both interviews are standouts in my career, but for different reasons. As someone who started in journalism just two years after he retired, I saw Cronkite as one of my heroes, a fellow Texan who spent more time in the living rooms of my parents and grandparents than I did, at times.

McCourt was a different sort, a storyteller and self-described late bloomer whose three memoirs were written after he retired from a 30-year teaching career. Our interview was in conjunction with the publication of *Teacher Man*, the story of his years in the New York City school system.

I thought about that interview as we put the finishing touches on this issue, which focuses on teacher quality and the difficulty schools have in hiring and keeping top-notch instructors in the classroom. There are a number of good quotes from that interview—McCourt, in the best Irish tradition, was an excel-

lent storyteller—but this one stood out.

“We have a patronizing attitude toward teachers. People think of it as the profession of failures. ... The public doesn't know what the teacher does in the classroom, what sorts of varied roles you have. I certainly didn't know it when I went into the classroom, and I certainly had to fumble around until I learned what I was doing.”

Today, there seems to be less and less time for fumbling around. In fact, as Senior Editor Lawrence Hardy notes at the start of our package on teacher quality, the race to the top is only just beginning.

“Say what you will about the president's ambitious plan for improving public education,” Larry writes. “You can't call it timid.”

Just like Frank McCourt.

I hope you will take some time to look through the other pieces in our back-to-school issue, including Managing Editor Kathleen Vail's visit back to a story she worked on a decade ago. The original piece, September 1999's “When Words Wound,” examined bullying in the wake of Columbine; this story provides you with an update of what has happened since then.

Plus, Associate Editor Joetta Sack-Min weighs in with a look at Response to Intervention, the effort that is resulting in dramatic drops in special ed enrollment, and Jack Jennings of the Center on Education Policy looks at the movement toward common standards.

Until next month,

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