



# Santa Barbara County Education Office

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## Bill Cirone op ed column

**To:** All newspapers  
Aug. 9, 2016 —Col. 16/17-04

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### **Public servants deserve our gratitude**

*By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools*

Recent violent incidents are horrifying to all — a rare unifying sentiment in these days of deep division. It was painfully difficult to watch the videos of young black men being shot at point blank range by policemen. It was equally horrifying to see the assassination of police officers that occurred in Dallas by a truly disturbed loner.

We all need to do our part to heal the hatred and mistrust that fuels these horrific deeds. Public rhetoric has fanned the flames of division. Careless words, unfounded theories, a disdain for facts that don't fit our worldview, and a mentality of "us vs. them," have only made matters worse.

One place to begin to help turn the tide, I believe, is by reminding ourselves that the true heroes in our midst have always been the public servants who work every day for the common good. Those who go into public service generally sacrifice much higher pay and far better working conditions to make their communities better places. I'm talking about people with high degrees of education and specialized training, who had a variety of career options. I'm referring to police officers, members of the military, teachers, firefighters, nurses, and all the lawyers and doctors and managers who chose to work in government roles rather than private practice, to help make their neighborhoods and communities safer places. I also include the janitors, road repair crews, bus drivers, park rangers, and lower-paid government workers who toil every day to help in their neighborhoods.

When did we start lumping these workers together as "the government" and start heaping scorn on them? When did these public servants become the enemy because of their jobs? It's outrageous.

In defending the bonuses that continued to flow to Wall Street executives after the economy crashed, some have said that they were contractual obligations and that had to be paid. These same commentators turned around and wanted to deny contract obligations to public employees, who each make the tiniest fraction of the Wall Street salaries. Plus, public employees work toward the common good, and add benefit to our society with the work they do every day. Where is the shared sacrifice among others?

When did the world go topsy-turvy to make the working person, and particularly public servants, the target of scorn? Those crafting that fiction must be chortling over those of us gullible enough to buy the line of argument.

Take teachers. In many countries teachers are revered and compensated highly. It is not a coincidence that those countries tend to have the highest achieving students. Some say teachers have it made in our country because they only work from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Nonsense. Teachers work till late hours, over weekends, holidays, and summers crafting more relevant lesson plans, evaluating student work, refining their professional abilities, and gathering materials.

Or take firefighters. After 9/11, and after the multiple fires here in Santa Barbara, our first responders were lionized, and appropriately so, for the heroic and brave work they do to keep us all safe, especially in disasters. Yet letters to the editor in local publications point to firefighters and other public safety workers as a huge problem because of the pensions owed them after a career of paying into those accounts while putting their lives on the line. What happened in such a short time to spin common sense on its head?

Critics point to short hours or short careers for public servants, but the premise itself rings hollow because we all know that our star athletes often have the shortest of seasons and workdays, and are among the highest paid. The same goes for our movie and TV stars. People want to include the preparation time for athletes and entertainers, but not for teachers or first responders. I do not begrudge these celebrities their money. I just say shame on those who turn around and disparage teachers and nurses and firefighters and police officers and all those whose work is so vital to our community and our nation, who struggle to get by on their full-time salaries. Without teachers there would be no other professions. Period.

Are there areas that need reform in the public sector? Absolutely. Just as there are in the private sector. Are there public servants who are incompetent, or dangerous, or even potentially criminal? Yes, there are a very, very small number. Police officers who harm rather than protect; firefighters who turn out to be arsonists; teachers who do harm to children; pariahs need to be dealt with harshly and quickly. For the most part they are a very small subset who are poorly trained, poorly suited, or truly cruel. Let's deal with that immediately and make needed reforms. But let's not paint an entire profession with the same broad brush because of a few aberrants. Let's still remember who the true heroes are among us.

Who gains from pointing the finger of blame at teachers and nurses and first responders? It seems clear to me that the agenda has nothing to do with the details being argued and everything to do with dismantling public institutions. If that's what we want to do, let's have the courage to say so — and then figure out who will protect our communities, teach our children, tend to the sick, keep our streets safe, and fight our fires.

Shame on all of us who scapegoat the true heroes in our midst, or remain silent while others do so. They say this country is angry. Let's get angry about THAT.

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