

# Teacher ranked “less effective” by the Los Angeles Times takes his own life

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The body of Rigoberto Ruelas, Jr., an elementary school teacher from an impoverished suburb of Los Angeles, was found far below a remote forest bridge on Sunday. It appears that Ruelas intentionally leapt to his death not long after he was labeled a “less effective teacher” by the *Los Angeles Times*.

On Wednesday, hundreds of people attended funeral services for Ruelas. Former colleagues and students spoke of Ruelas as an excellent teacher who went above and beyond what was required.

Ruelas, 39, worked at Miramonte Elementary, a school where each day of teaching requires a certain degree of heroism. The school is located in one of the poorest neighborhoods of Los Angeles, an area is plagued by violence, drug addiction, and the presence of criminal gangs. The challenges and dangers facing young people, as well as those who teach them, are immense.

Ruelas had worked at Miramonte Elementary School all his life. After growing up in the neighborhood, Ruelas joined the school as a teacher’s aide at age 22 and began teaching four years later. He lived only a few blocks from the school.

His former students recall his teaching as passionate, tireless, and selfless. Ruelas often stayed after hours at school to tutor students individually and to counsel them in their personal lives. Since his death, many former students have come forward to describe Ruelas as a mentor who always gave good advice and worked to keep them out of gangs.

“He took the worst students and tried to change their lives,” Ismael Delgado, a former student, told the Associated Press. “I had friends who wanted to be gangsters, but he talked them out of it. He treated you like family.”

Hundreds of students, teachers, and workers have

expressed similar sentiments in online comments wherever Ruelas’ death has been reported.

“This is truly a sad story,” one woman wrote. “This was a man that took pride in himself as a teacher. He honestly believed he was making a difference in these kids’ lives.”

“Teaching at an urban high school is by far the most stressful job I’ve ever had,” wrote another, sympathizing with the hardships faced by teachers like Ruelas.

The myriad difficulties involved in their daily work weigh heavily on teachers. “The little feedback that we are getting right now is that that school wasn’t the healthiest place to be working,” Ruelas’ brother Alejandro, told a local radio station. “The people who are supposed to be helping them as far as administrators, principals, are using these kinds of scores [published by the *Times*] also to bully and harass.”

Decades of budget cuts and mismanagement have taken their toll on public schools in the US. Class sizes have skyrocketed, outdated textbooks have not been replaced, school libraries have been closed, art and music classes are no longer offered, and many school buildings have become filthy and dangerous. Many teachers are compelled to buy supplies such as paper and pencils out of their own salaries.

At the same time, teachers themselves are faced with stagnant wages and rapidly evaporating benefits. Like the rest of the working class in the US, teachers confront deteriorating living standards and financial insecurity.

Teachers confront an official society that at every turn strives to cultivate backwardness and ignorance among young people. Military recruiters lurk in school hallways. A teacher must struggle daily to develop

among students an appreciation for history, culture, literature, and science.

In August, the *Los Angeles Times* initiated a major propaganda offensive in favor of the Obama administration's plan to "reform" education, in part by targeting supposedly ineffective teachers. This campaign featured the provocative publication of teacher "rankings" based on student test scores as part of a series of special reports termed "Grading the Teachers," which were ultimately designed to turn public opinion against public school teachers. This campaign was no doubt orchestrated with the Obama administration, and was expressly endorsed by Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan.

Ruelas' "ranking" was among the thousands published by the *Los Angeles Times* as part of its campaign against teachers. According to the *Los Angeles Times* "Grading the Teachers" report, Ruelas was "average" at teaching English, "less effective" in math, and "less effective" overall.

The outpouring of praise for Ruelas' teaching by his former students and colleagues exposes the complete fraud of the "Grading the Teachers" campaign. The campaign has nothing to do with improving education. It is nothing more than a crude smear against teachers, designed to justify mass teacher layoffs and the closure and privatization of public schools.

It may never be known what combination of circumstances led to Ruelas' heartbreaking choice. At the same time, the vicious campaign against teachers by the Obama administration and the *Los Angeles Times* must have contributed substantially to the heavy burden he carried.



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