

How We Do School

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HOW WE DO SCHOOL



JAMIN VER VELDE (99)

In addition to teaching History and Philosophy of Education, Dr. Matthew Beimers serves as director of the School Leadership Program.

School was hard for Dr. Matthew Beimers ('94) when he was a child—or, as he says, he made it hard for himself.

He didn't see the value in school, he didn't do his homework, and he spent time in the principal's office. As a result, he didn't flourish academically.

"I tried hard to make sure everyone knew that I didn't care about school. I was especially obnoxious about it in Grade 8," he says. "I dressed the part, too, with my 1980s jean jacket, a mullet, and ripped jeans."

But he had a secret: he loved to write and to read.

"I'd get terrible grades, but I'd head home, go to my sister's room, grab a copy of an Agatha Christie book, lock the door, and read."

He also had an English teacher who inspired him to rethink his views on education.

"I loved Mrs. Witte's writing assignments, even though I acted like I hated them. She gave me such good feedback on all my assignments, which killed my reputation," he jokes. "One day, she pulled me into the hallway and said, 'Matt Beimers! I'm onto you. You are a great writer, and you'd better become an English teacher someday.'"

That, he says, was the first time he remembers someone saying he was good at academics. And she was the first of many great teachers who never gave up on him.

As an English education major at Dordt, Beimers was inspired by his English faculty—Dave Schelhaas, Dr. James Calvin Schaap, Dr. Mike Vanden Bosch, Dr. Bob De Smith—as well as education

faculty like Dr. John VanDyk.

"They never let me off the hook, but they also encouraged me. They held me accountable, but they also gave me support," he says. "Those professors were so formative. All my life, I'll have a debt of gratitude to them."

Since college, Beimers has served at Christian schools in British Columbia and in Montana as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. He earned an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from Dordt and an Ed.D. in School Leadership from George Fox University.

Now, 28 years since he graduated from Dordt, Beimers is back, inspiring the next generation of educators as an assistant professor of education. Although he primarily teaches courses for the M.Ed.

program, he also teaches History and Philosophy of Education, an upper-level education course that “examines how our societal perspectives and personal core beliefs affect the ways we ‘do school,’ see students, plan teaching and learning, and make curriculum.” It’s a favorite class for education and non-education majors, in part because of Beimers’s excellent teaching.

Is it ironic that someone who once proclaimed he hated school is now one of its strongest advocates? Perhaps. But in many ways, Beimers’s educational history has helped him to be a great teacher for this course—a course that challenges students to think about why it’s important to see people as image-bearers of God, to be gracious with themselves and others, and to remember how important it is to have wonderful educators.

ABOUT THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

In History and Philosophy of Education, students examine how education is shaped by worldviews, analyze the impact of key historical events and legal issues in America, and compare as well as contrast leading philosophies of education through a Reformed Christian lens. They also must construct, articulate, and defend a personal philosophy of education.

“As a class, we ask ourselves, ‘What are the things you believe to be true about students, about the purpose of education, about the value of curriculum? How are these things influenced by your worldview?’” says Beimers.

The class is structured in seven modules: laying a foundation, the purpose of education, your calling and work, your philosophy and worldview, your view of the teacher, your view of the student, and your view of the curriculum.

Students put their personal philosophy of education into writing and meet one-on-one with Beimers for a personal philosophy of education interview.

“Many schools ask teachers for their philosophy of education, so from a practical standpoint this can help students,” he says. “At the exit interview, I try to ask questions that I used to ask as a principal, just so they can practice articulating their philosophy of education out loud.”

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— Dr. Matthew Beimers

Beimers hopes his students learn to think deeply about teaching and learning—about the “why” behind the “what” and “how” of teaching. He says that how we think about school and people is all related to our belief structures and how we view the world; these perspectives and beliefs shape how a teacher sets up a classroom, incorporates management protocols, and makes assessment choices.

“If I think of a student as simply a brain

on a stick, then my purpose is just to dispense as much knowledge as I can into them with a goal that they will be able to regurgitate that information on a test. But in History and Philosophy of Education, we ask, ‘What if students are more than that—what if students are whole beings made in the image of God?’”

That, too, has pedagogical implications—how a teacher sets up a classroom, how he or she disciplines, what curricular choices he or she makes, and more.

“What if the job of educators in K-12 schools is, in a rigorous academic setting, helping students develop skills or discover gifts that they don’t know they have, not to serve themselves but to know that those gifts were given by God so that they may use these gifts for the sake of others?” asks Beimers.

If we believe that a child is made in the image of God, then we should treat him or her with dignity and care.

“Shaming them isn’t okay, because they have value simply because of who they are already,” he says. “They don’t have more value to me as an educator because they behave or get good grades. They don’t have less value to me because school is hard for them, or they

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



“As Christian educators, it is our responsibility to allow our beliefs to shape how we teach. We are image-bearing teachers teaching image-bearing students,” says Greichaly Ellens.

struggle academically.”

Students have value simply because they are made by God.

“Helping future educators understand the view of the child is so significant in understanding the philosophy of education. When you understand that the child is made in the image of God, that influences so many of our other moves in the classroom,” says Beimers.

BUILDING TRUST, SHOWING GRACE

What education major Mikayla Zonnefeld loves about History and Philosophy of Education is the community that exists within the classroom. Nearly every class begins with a check-in question that students discuss at their tables, which helps to build rapport and trust.

“Taking the time to just chat with my classmates about how life is going has helped to strengthen the community within the class. We also are invited to talk with our group throughout the class session to throw ideas back and forth,” she says. “We talk in History and

Philosophy of Education about how important it is for students to feel safe, and Dr. Beimers does an excellent job of modeling how to do this.”

Greichaly Ellens, also an education major, has enjoyed the engaging, collaborative environment in which

“We have discussed the importance of having grace for students in addition to holding them highly accountable. This combination creates a safe, productive learning environment.

— Greichaly Ellens

she and her peers are encouraged to confidently share their viewpoints and experiences.

“Our discussions about grace in the classroom have influenced my thoughts about teaching the most,” she says.

“We have discussed the importance of having grace for students in addition to

holding them highly accountable. This combination creates a safe, productive learning environment.”

Zonnefeld also appreciates the discussions around grace.

“Dr. Beimers talked about how we are called to teach Christianly, and one way we can do that is by showing abundant grace to our students and to ourselves. Students bear the image of Christ, but they are broken. Students are going to fall short and mess up. Showing students grace when they fall short can help bring restoration to them,” she says. “We also talked about how, as teachers, we too are fallen image-bearers. We are not going to get everything right, and we must give ourselves grace and move on from our mistakes.”

As a senior theology major going into ministry, Zane Gunter says he has found “a ton of correlation between education and ministry” through History and Philosophy of Education.

“Professor Beimers helps us to focus on our specific major or field. It’s not so much about the philosophy of education; we’re learning through the lens of education, but it’s more about how to develop a philosophy for the workplace you’re in—taking your own version of the teacher, student, and curriculum, and making it relevant to you.”

Blake Harmsen, a senior business major, has been able to take what he’s learned in the course and apply it to his interests in finance and accounting.

“The way that Professor Beimers is able to relate it back to our majors is something I really enjoy about the class,” he says. “Yes, we’re talking about the view of the teacher and the student, but I can directly relate that to business as well. How does it change the way I view my coworkers, my supervisor, or those I supervise? The way Professor Beimers shifts it and makes it more personalized is something I’ve enjoyed.”

Harmsen says that Beimers is the best professor he has had at Dordt, which might be surprising given that he is not

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Dr. David Mulder and Beimers contribute to the Hallway Conversations podcast, where they talk about Christian education and more. Listen in at hallwayconvos.podbean.com.

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



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"I have always viewed education as an important calling, but this class has deepened my view of the purpose of teaching," says Mikayla Zonnefeld.

an education major.

"It's in the way Professor Beimers cares about each student. He's willing to start the day with prayer about our sporting events, music concerts, and other things we have going on in our lives. He came to one of my golf meets, and I've seen him at basketball and volleyball games, as well as at concerts. He wants to cheer his students on in whatever they do."

Beimers cares about each student in his class, and it shows, says Ellens.

"I appreciate how intentional he is in building relationships with us and ensuring that we feel prepared to merge our philosophies of education into our future classrooms."

"Dr. Beimers is such a thoughtful professor," echoes Zonnefeld. "He greets us each morning at the door of the classroom with a fist bump. When he sees me around campus, he greets me by name and shows genuine interest in my life. When he grades papers, it's evident that he really reads them and cares about them as he leaves thoughtful comments. I also know that he has extremely high expectations for me as his student, and he wants me to do well."

"I GET TO DO THIS"

Dordt students are awesome, says Beimers.

"How do you describe Dordt students? They're curious, they're encouraging, they're gracious. They have a desire to learn, to deepen their understanding of their role in the world. They want to make a difference, which I love. They want to go from this place and do significant things."

Professor of Education Dr. David Mulder ('98) likes to say, "We get to do this." Beimers feels that when he thinks about his work as an education professor at Dordt.

"I get to do this, and I get to work with future educators who are thinking so well about their faith. It makes me excited about the future of education, and it makes me excited about the future of non-education majors too."

As seniors, Harmsen and Gunter prepare to wrap up their education. Harmsen will move to Sheboygan, Wisconsin at an insurance company as a business analyst.

"I'll be the middleman between the IT department and the other departments in the building," he says. "Even there, I'll

have to think about how I'm going to treat people I'm interacting with—how can I put them above myself and serve their needs? It's something that I've taken away from the class. Beimers talks about, as Christians, we should be peculiar people—there should be something different about us. The way we care for and love people should be evident."

Gunter will work for Grace Bible Church in College Station, Texas, while also pursuing a master's degree at Dallas Theological Seminary. He is getting married this summer, which has prompted him to think more about what he hopes for his future children when it comes to education.

"The class changed my perspective about being a parent in the future and what kind of education I want my children to have. It's more than just where you live determining where your children go to school. It's about being invested and understanding that it's not solely the teacher's responsibility to teach your children; you must teach your children as well. I have a much deeper appreciation for teachers and the difficulty of what they do, and what an investment it is for them. I also understand the humanity of students and the importance of curriculum."

Gunter thinks every Dordt student should "take a Beimers class."

"Or they should at least take History and Philosophy of Education. This class helped me to become aware of who I am and what I'm doing. There's a method, a meaning, and a purpose behind what I do, and understanding who I am and how it's all connected. The class encouraged me, and it surpassed my expectations. It was a blessing and expanded my horizons."

Looking back at all the teachers who have positively influenced him—from Mrs. Witte to his Ed.D. faculty—Beimers is grateful to be able to help his students learn how to "do school."

"You stand on the shoulders of those who came before you, and you just want to honor their good work, honor the students in the class, and, ultimately, glorify God," says Beimers.

SARAH MOSS ('10)