

By Molly Turpin

Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) describes her once-typical work day: "I'd start my day at 6 in the morning, I'd get home at 4 in the evening and after I fixed dinner for my kids, I'd be doing papers for another four hours," McCollum said. "And I love what I did."

Among the lawyers and business owners in Congress today, there are a significant number of teachers, professors and educators, like McCollum — a former substitute teacher.

"If you look around here, you find that the largest number of people are lawyers," said Rep. John Olver (D-Mass.), who taught chemistry before running for the Massachusetts state legislature. "The second-largest number of people are teachers."

For many teachers-turned-politicians, the influence of their former careers are evident, whether in political or legislative skill or in policy ideals, and though their routes from the halls of academia to Capitol Hill vary widely, one sentiment is common among them: "It did teach me to stand up for teachers," said Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.). "It's a lot of work."

For McCollum, teaching was a longtime goal, but few opportunities presented themselves after she graduated from college. While keeping a part-time job at Sears, McCollum worked as a substitute for several years before her first political run for St. Paul City Council.

She said she never sent a student to the principal and quickly gained a reputation among teachers for being able to manage difficult pupils.

"I think a lot of my teaching skills kind of came into big play when we were doing a lot of the town-hall meetings, especially during the healthcare debate," she said.

Unlike McCollum, who dreamed of teaching, for Gutierrez, it was an opportunity that presented itself. While looking for jobs after graduation and finding few, he remembered his experience teaching creative writing in college and eventually approached the principal of his own school in Puerto Rico.

There Gutierrez taught English language in elementary schools.

"The most important thing was diction," he said. "They were more focused on what you heard in English than anything else."

The place of language in education played a large role in the teaching careers of both Gutierrez and McCollum. In Minnesota, McCollum found that many students and their parents were learning English as a second language.

"If mom and dad are learning English, and working a job and contributing to our community and their child is trying to learn English at the same time, can you imagine the challenge of trying to make sure that that homework has a successful outcome?" she said.

English as a second language was just one of the challenges the future lawmakers faced as teachers, and each has some strong feelings about issues in education and how to solve them.

Rep. Edolphus Towns (D-N.Y.), a former professor of sociology at Fordham University, said the teaching profession needs to both recruit and retain good teachers. He argues that teaching is not a desirable enough option for young people today.

"A lot of times when I talk to young people at graduations, I always put my hands over my eyes like this and say, 'I think I see some engineers, I think I see some nurses, I think I see some doctors,' and then I say, 'I think I see a few teachers,' and the kids yell, 'No!'"

Among the Congress members who returned The Hill's call for former teachers — notably, all

Democrats — issues in education often came around to resources.

"Funding. Funding. Funding is the key challenge," Gutierrez said.

For Congress members who worked in higher education, like Towns, the skills that education bestowed on their political lives are sometimes more particular. They noted that their research backgrounds influenced them, and argued that the place of research in U.S. society needs protecting.

As a former professor of political science and public policy at Duke University, one might argue that **Rep. David Price (D-N.C.)** is the one of the best-qualified people in the House for his job.

After receiving his Ph.D. from Yale University, **Price** began teaching at Duke in 1973 and taught there until his first term in Congress began in 1987. He said his experience in academia made him very familiar with how Congress works, but his political involvement as a student influenced his political ideals, especially his work in the Civil Rights Movement.

Price actually worried that being a professor might be a disadvantage in elections, but was pleased to find the opposite was true. Like any thorough scholar, he put his concern to the test: "We did a poll in the first campaign where we were testing what people thought about Duke University and what people thought about me teaching politics," he said. The results were overwhelmingly positive, and Price noted that it helps to run in a district that includes North Carolina's "Research Triangle," an area comprising the state's flagship universities.

Olver, a former professor of chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, said being a professor seemed to be a mixed bag as far as advantages go. He found that his background in science was widely applicable to solving legislative issues, but he also worried that professorial legislators were not able to explain themselves or their beliefs engagingly or convincingly enough.

As a scientist, Olver said, he is always careful about making claims before having all the facts.

"That one is difficult," he said, "because the people who are out there making the most outrageous statements are always getting the most attention.

"We are in a technological age where most people don't have any understanding of where the technology is going and are using it now in a very broad kind of way but have lost the sense of where science is, how critical science was to the beginning of all that."

While members of Congress who taught in public schools appreciate the role of a teacher, Olver and Price also recognize the importance of higher-education grants to undertake a range of research and prepare students for jobs.

"Public higher education is how we made education available and accessible to a huge number of people," Olver said.

Whether it's retaining teachers or protecting grants for higher education, members might turn to a lesson Towns took from his experience.

"We had to form coalitions," he said, "and that's something that I really brought from the school system into the political system."