Evaluating teachers and principals: What's the role of teachers unions?

written by Lois Weiner | February 26, 2014

(This blog was adapted from my remarks in a remarkable forum on Feb. 8 in NYC that critiqued current policies evaluating principals and teachers and examined possible solutions. The panel was videotaped and will be uploaded shortly. I'll give readers the URL when that occurs.)

It's difficult for us in NYC to imagine a teachers union that focuses on social justice in schools, making them humane, supportive places for kids of color. But we can see what unions might do by examining how Teachers Unite operates and what its teacher-members do in schools. They are using restorative practices to democratize decision-making, establish collective voice for teachers and collaborate with parents, communities, and students.

But even in their degraded condition, teachers unions provide an essential corrective to narrow measures of teacher quality. Even if they don't realize they are doing so, unions put teacher quality in the larger social and educational context. They are a break on policies that scapegoat teachers and impose easy-to-mandate but destructive solutions.

We can no more say that teachers, as individuals, are solely responsible for educational outcomes than we can say that emergency room physicians should be paid, valued, and punished on the basis of the mortality rates or longevity of their patients. While teacher quality is an important factor, we know from much research that it is only ONE factor. The reification of teacher quality is an ideological construct to dismiss other salient factors.

To what research do I refer? It's important to state the warrants for my claims because so much educational policy is now driven by ideologically-driven anecdote, slipshod analyses based on speculation, reports that masquerade as scholarship. Policies ignore the body of empirical work that debunks the claim that teacher quality can be separated from organizational climate and administrative practices, for instance by Richard Ingersoll at University of Pennsylvania. Writing in the American Educational Research Journal (AERJ) in 2001, "Teacher turnover and teacher shortages: an organizational analysis" Ingersoll examines why schools are hard to staff. His arguments and data are laid out in more detail in his 2003 book "Who controls teachers' work? Power and accountability in America's schools" (Harvard Univ. Press).

Does teacher quality count? Yes, of course. So do other factors. The December 2013 issue of AERJ contained five empirical studies that identified factors other than "teacher quality" that correlated with student achievement:

1. Proportion of students in a class who had been retained and had large numbers of unexcused absences

2. Family alienation from the school

3. Use of pedagogy that encourages shallow learning

4. Implementation of high-quality summer arts and literacy programs that are accompanied by support to parents for transportation arrangements and encouraging their children to attend

5. Classroom characteristics that make teachers' use of discourse strategies associated with improved student reading comprehension a challenge. This same study found that racial/ethnic minority teachers were 14.5% more likely to use the discourse strategies associated with more student learning. Yet current policies, including those evaluating teachers, are reducing the proportion of minority teachers in schools.

The role of teachers unions is to alter the discussion about teacher quality to take into account factors in schools – and in the society – that teachers need to do their jobs well. Teachers' professional responsibility is to change lives and hopefully society, for the better. To do this, teachers cannot be fearful- as they are now. Teachers have the right, as do all workers, to be treated with respect and dignity on the job. They need the security of knowing that should a complaint be brought against them, they will have the right to hear the evidence against them and put forward, if they wish, a defense of their actions, and to have the evidence heard by an independent party. This is what is meant by "due process" and in defending due process teachers unions protect a right that is at the core of a democratic society – the right to a fair, impartial hearing when accused of a misdeed, before punishment is exacted.

I want to close with a comment on the Vergara lawsuit now being heard in California. Backers of the Vergara lawsuit aim to privatize schools, dismantle public education as we have known it, and make teaching contract labor, a job that young people do for a few years and then leave. Anyone who has spent time in schools knows that student testimony about some teachers' demeaning remarks is likely accurate. We who defend teachers' right to due process have to speak up and say that schools need to be changed so that all students are treated with respect.

The role of teachers unions is to put forward this vision of schools free from our society's epidemic of

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racism and fight for it, as is being done in Chicago. The smothering domination of the UFT machine in local and state politics can blind us to the new social movement of teachers emerging elsewhere. It is a movement of activists committed to social justice, collaborations with family and communities, democratizing the unions. This new movement is opening opportunities to have the hard discussions we need about what good teaching looks like and how to make that happen in classrooms serving all kids, especially those who have been denied the opportunity to achieve their full human potential. In the process of waging these struggles alongside students and parents in communities who deserve better schools, we'll open space to have discussions we need to generate the complex evaluative measures good teaching requires.

Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. You can follow me on twitter and Facebook, as well as my blog every Wednesday here at New Politics. Or write me at drweinerlo@gmail.com.