In Defense of Public Education

written by Megan Behrent | June 30, 2011

ANYONE LIVING IN THE UNITED STATES today has, undoubtedly, been bludgeoned over the head with the key argument of those who don the false mantle of education reform, despite never having set foot in a classroom themselves: that the biggest obstacles standing in the way of education today are teachers and their unions.

We are in the midst of an all-out war on teachers and their unions. Couched in the rhetoric of "education reform," unionized teachers have been declared public enemy number one in an attempt to dismantle the last vestiges of public services in this country. Beneath the calls for "reform" from the new corporate education enthusiasts, as well as from both Republican and Democratic politicians, is an insidious and dangerous attempt to discredit the very idea of public education. In the process, these noble reformers also hope to open up public education to investors and profiteers from the business world, for whom education represents a multi-billion-dollar industry.

For teachers, the current climate is like entering a twilight zone where one's commitment to education, to students, and to the communities they serve has become increasingly suspect — proof positive of a secret desire to stymie the efforts of the corporate reformers and to prevent students from learning — obviously, the number one reason people decide to spend their lives in the field of public education.

Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for Superman*, released last fall, has become the icon of the teacher-and-union bashing movement. In this much promoted movie, Guggenheim purports to take on the hard questions in public education by joining the chorus of those for whom teachers are the problem, and charter schools the solution. This glossy film-length brochure for charter schools was not, however, greeted with the acclamation and fervor its director had hoped to elicit. Instead, it launched a backlash against the "public school bad, charter school narrative" that it helped to promulgate. Protests erupted around the country and at the box office where it was a failure.

The reality is, despite the media barrage against "bad" teachers (a cover for the attack on ALL teachers), the vast majority of the U.S. public supports teachers. Nonetheless, the ongoing media campaign against teachers has had very real ideological effects on popular opinions about education.

A recent poll by *Time Magazine* encapsulates many of the contradictions in popular debates about education. Over 61 percent of those polled thought that teachers were underpaid, and 77 percent strongly or somewhat agree, "teaching is among the most under-appreciated professions." At the same time, 50 percent think unions are obstacles and 66 percent oppose tenure — despite the fact that the elimination of tenure and teacher unions would make teaching an even more unattractive, underappreciated, and unprotected profession with a higher turnaround rate than exists even now. To improve education, the vast majority of people cite the need for greater parental involvement, more training and more support for teachers and higher salaries. Only 6 percent of those polled believe that more test preparation would be beneficial to our students, and yet, a staggering 64 percent believe that teacher evaluations should be based (at least in part) on student test scores — a reform that would inevitably increase "teaching to the test" and a stripping down of curricula to focus less on critical thinking and more on what is "testable."[1]

The numbers in this poll are both a testament to the profound inroads that have been made into public consciousness about education by the corporate deformers, as well as the enduring support for teachers and a common sense notion that testing, longer days, and rewards are hardly the

panacea for all of the ills of our public education system that is claimed by the deformers. Above all else, they make clear the dire need for a new movement for education reform, led by teachers which could challenge the one sided war on public schools and demand accountability not just from teachers but from those who systematically underfund our schools, and ensure massive inequity and segregation in public education. Teachers clearly need to launch a new PR campaign to turn back the anti-teacher tide and put themselves at the forefront of a struggle for quality, equal public education.

In this regard, the teachers in Wisconsin have led the way. Despite a massive media onslaught against teachers, their unions and public unions more generally, support for teachers in Wisconsin increased during the course of their sickout. For any teacher who has been told that we have to hold back militancy for fear of exacerbating anti-union sentiment among those who have it worse, Wisconsin proves that it is when teachers lead the struggle for social justice, for unions rights and for our students' futures that we gain the most support.

Are Teacher Unions to Blame?

TEACHER UNION BASHING has become a popular sport in the United States. The union bashing disease has infected every aspect of popular debate on the topic of education. As the *New York Times* explained in an article examining the polarization and dichotomies that dominate discussions about education, in this debate, the dominant argument is that, "If you support the teachers' union, you don't care about the students."[2] The narratives put forward by reformers such as Guggenheim among others, "create an image of public-school teachers as cosseted by government largesse, our nation's new "welfare queens."[3] The notion of teacher unions as monstrous behemoths protecting the worst teachers, and preventing education reform is a myth, which has absolutely no bearing in reality. In fact teacher unions are the only reason we have such crucial educational reforms as caps on class size. As a high school teacher in New York City, my classes cannot exceed 34 students. This number is still appallingly high, but it is only because I have a union that I don't have 50 students per class, which would mean 250 students per term.

Much has been made recently of teacher tenure, which, if one were to believe Law & Order protects child molesters and murderers — an idea which is unfortunately prevalent if categorically untrue. Far from ensuring lifetime entitlement to a job, tenure simply assures the right to due process — a right that, frankly, all workers should have. The idea that due process is somehow fundamentally at odds with a student's right to an education is like arguing that equal rights for women makes them bad mothers, thus, making the 19th amendment, for example, at odds with the rights of children — an idea that is certainly promulgated by the worst of the extreme right wing bigots, but, impossible to defend by those with an iota of rational sense.

Tenure protects not only teachers but our students. It protects teachers from the whims of administrators and allows us to advocate for our students without fear of retaliation. To weaken tenure is to go back in time to the days when nepotism and prejudice were rampant in the hiring and firing of teachers and the right to academic, political, and intellectual freedom was systematically denied to public school teachers. Teachers are the primary advocates for students in the public education system as we know it. Tenure exists to allow teachers to exercise their professional judgment when it comes to what is in the best interest of their students.

Rather than teachers' rights on the job counterpoising to students' rights to an education, we should see the two as inextricably linked. As one union activist and early advocate of school reform, Margaret Haley, argued, the "freeing of the child" or the student through education,

> …can only be secured by the freeing of the teacher (…) To the teacher it means freedom from care and worry for the material needs of the present and the future — in other words, adequate salary and old age pensions, freedom to teach the child as an individual and not to deal with children en masse. In other words, fewer children for each teacher. Last but not least, the teacher must have recognition in the educational system as an educator. The tendency is to relegate her to the position of a factory hand, or a taker of orders from above.[4]

Unions historically have played a key role in fighting for such "freeing" of the teacher and the student. In fact, despite the union bashers' claims, the quality of a school's education has more to do with poverty and income levels in the community it serves than whether or not the teachers are unionized. If there is any correlation between teacher unionization rates and school success, it is that the highest performing school systems both internationally and in the United States are more likely to be highly unionized, with high percentages of experienced, tenured teachers. As Paul Thomas argues in *The Guardian,* the attempt to blame teacher unions for the failure of schools lacks any empirical evidence and its flaws can easily be highlighted by looking at just two examples:

> First, the new reformers hold up Finland as the model for education reform — while failing to identify two crucial facts: that Finland has low childhood poverty (about 3-4 percent, compared to over 20 percent in the United States) and that Finland's teachers are nearly 100 percent unionized. Consider, also, South Carolina, a high-poverty state with a reputation for having a weak education system. South Carolina joined the accountability era at the beginning, taking "A Nation at Risk" seriously and creating standards, testing, and accountability in 1984. Despite nearly three decades of precisely the process supported by the new reformers, South Carolina finds itself still ranking at the bottom of education in the U.S. The real dynamic here is that South Carolina remains a high-poverty state — the true cause of low test scores — and also that South Carolina is a non-union state, with no union contracts for teachers and no tenure.[5]

Indeed, a comparison of schools in the United States based on states in which teachers are under union contracts or not is quite instructive. Comparing the scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress between states that have and do not have binding union contracts, Matthew Di Carlo, a senior fellow at the non-profit Albert Shanker Institute, notes:

> Out of these 10 states, only one (Virginia) has an average rank above the median, while four are in the bottom 10, and seven are in the bottom 15. These data make it very clear that states without binding teacher contracts are not doing better, and the majority are actually among the lowest performers in the nation.
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> In contrast, nine of the 10 states with the highest average ranks are high coverage states, including Massachusetts, which has the highest average score on all four tests.
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> If anything, it seems that the presence of teacher contracts in a state has a positive effect on achievement.[6]

Di Carlo acknowledges that many other factors undoubtedly influence these results and thus his critics might rightfully object to his findings. "They might say." Di Carlo says of his critics, "that there are dozens of other observed and unobserved factors that influence achievement, such as state

laws, lack of resources, income, parents' education, and curriculum, and that these factors are responsible for the lower scores in the 10 non-contract states." To which, Di Carlo replies, "Exactly."[7]

Nonetheless, it is clear that, unions are not the problem. Nor, it seems, is tenure or the lengthy contracts the politicians and pundits so love to hate. In fact, the majority of claims by education reformers such as Arne Duncan, Michelle Rhee, not to mention Bill Gates and Eli Broad, quickly disintegrate in the face of actual research and evidence — not to mention actual experience in the classroom — an aversion to which all of these self- proclaimed reformers share.

Debunking the Myths on Teacher Quality, Merit Pay & Charter Schools

IN TERMS OF ESTABLISHED SCIENTIFIC STUDIES, the reforms that have shown the most significant improvement in learning are: significant class size reduction and the expansion of early childhood education, despite all claims to the contrary.

This is not, however, what you will read or hear in any mainstream media. Instead, we are told that "you can't just throw money at the problem" (unless it's tied to test scores) and that the biggest variable in a child's learning is "teacher quality." This has no basis at all in fact. The reality is that the biggest predictor of a child's future is what their parents do which has everything to do with class and the growing economic inequalities in this country. Despite all the diversions in the media, the profound inequality in funding that plagues our schools is still at the root of the problems we face in our schools today.

A new study examining projected graduation rates based on third grade reading levels and the impact of poverty proves in horrifying detail the terrible impact that economic inequality has on our schools. Overall, "22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, compared to 6 percent of those who have never been poor. This rises to 32 percent for students spending more than half of their childhood in poverty."[8] Even among third graders who were proficient in reading, living in poverty greatly decreased their chances of graduating from high school with 11 percent of poor children who were proficient in reading failing to graduate in contrast to only 2 percent of their counterparts who had never lived in poverty. In all, 70 percent of children who did not graduate from high school had lived in poverty for at least part of their childhood. Not surprisingly, black and Hispanic students are disproportionately impacted — as they are more likely to live in communities with high concentrations of poverty. Black and Hispanic students who have not reached reading proficiency by third grade are 11 to 12 times less likely to graduate from high school than their white counterparts.[9]

A study in New York City analyzing the demographics of schools targeted for closing found what activists have been arguing all along — that these schools have more homeless students, more special education students, more over age students and that these numbers have increased in the past few years. The report found that while the number of special education students citywide stayed "at 12 percent from 2007-08 to 2008-09, but the percentage of special education students in closing high schools rose to 18 percent from 16 percent."[10] Furthermore, "The number of students in temporary housing (…) quadrupled citywide during the economic downturn, from 1 percent of the total student enrollment in 2007-08 to 4 percent in 2008-09. But at closing high schools, 6 percent of students were in temporary housing in 2008-09. At four closing schools, 10 percent or more students were homeless."[11] The rate of students over age for their grade in closing high schools increased from the prior year, whereas citywide it had decreased in the same period and overall it was double the citywide average. What these numbers make clear is that it is not our schools which are failing, but rather it is the Department of Education which is failing our schools, by systematically creating the conditions for schools to fail and targeting them for closure when they inevitably do.

In the midst of these massive inequalities and every indication that poverty, not the teacher, is the key reason for the failure of our schools, the current obsession with "teacher quality" is hypocritical, fantastical, and almost comical — were it not so dangerous.

Even a report by the Department of Education on the use of test scores to evaluate teachers, argues that, "more than 90 percent of the variation in student gain scores is due to the variation in student-level factors that are not under control of the teacher."[12] Most studies cited in defense of the "teacher quality" argument which measure the "value added" by teachers — itself a disturbing way of thinking about learning — do not isolate other factors outside of the school that might influence learning over the period of the study.

In addition, the results of these types of statistical models have proven to be extremely flawed and fluctuate widely from year to year. The report cited above notes that, "Studies from a wide set of districts and states have found that one-half to two-thirds of teachers in the top quintile or quartile of performance from a particular year drop below that category in the subsequent year." Even with three years of data for each individual teacher, there is an error rate of 26 percent — by any standard a capricious measure to make high stakes decisions about teachers and their "effectiveness" in a classroom.[13]

While value added models hold little credibility among any serious education researchers, their impact on teachers can be devastating. The witch hunt launched by the *L.A. Times* who published a database of teachers and their "effectiveness" based on this flawed model, claimed its first victim: Rigoberto Ruelas, a 14-year teacher in Los Angeles, who committed suicide after the reports came out. As another teacher remarked, "I'm only surprised that this hasn't happened more. The issue here is that you have stripped people of their identities."[14]

If we really want to talk about "teacher quality," the questions we should be asking are: What makes a good teacher? And, how can we provide support to teachers to that end? Why is the turnover rate so high? How does stripping teachers of protections against harassment and retaliation help them become better teachers? And, can anyone be the best teacher that (s)he could be with 170 students a day?

The reality is that countless studies have demonstrated that teacher experience is one of the key factors influencing a teacher’s effectiveness. Of note, a re-analysis of the Tennessee STAR Project showed that kindergarten students had higher achievement and earnings as adults, depending on how long their teachers had been in the profession. Notably, this same study found that smaller class sizes in the early education years had a notable impact in increasing student learning — despite all the pundits’ claims to the contrary.[15]

Despite the media’s contention that teaching in a public school is so easy that you can "breathe" and get tenure; almost 45 percent of teachers leave within the first 4 years in New York City. The problem is not that tenure is too easy; rather, the problem is the New York City Department of Education has failed when it comes to providing the support, space, and resources to retain teachers and help them become the best teachers they can be. Indeed, it is notable that in the United States, "Teacher Evaluation" systems are designed almost exclusively to "get rid" of the so-called "bad" teachers — a concept anathema to countries like Finland whose educational system is so admired. Responding angrily to the question about Finland’s lack of teacher ratings, counselor to the Finnish Board of Education for three decades, explains, "Why should teachers be evaluated?" Instead, he "proudly declare[d] that Finland has no bad teachers, and that each teacher is highly disciplined and does not need to be subject to ratings." The respect, support, training, and academic freedom afforded to teachers in Finland, would be welcome changes to the blame-the-teacher mentality that drives so many promising teachers out of our schools.

But, instead, we are told that charter schools are the panacea for all our educational system's ills. Once again, this flies in the face of existing research, such as the largest comparative study of charter schools conducted by Stanford University, that demonstrated that most charter schools actually do worse than or are equal to public schools. In fact, only 17 percent of charter schools do better than public schools, while 37 percent perform worse.

Likewise, despite the popularity of merit pay among corporate reformers, it simply doesn't work. The first scientific study of performance pay ever conducted in the United States by Vanderbilt University showed that merit pay alone in no way improved student outcomes.[16] Other international studies have confirmed these results. In fact, as Alfie Kohn's research has pointed out, such schemes often have negative effects on teaching and learning.[17]

Despite the total absence of research supporting the cure-all reforms of the corporate education reformers, they nonetheless perpetuate an ideology of education reform rooted in neoliberalism, not pedagogy.

In The *Global Assault on Education*, Lois Weiner and Mary Compton provide a thorough and compelling analysis of the international nature of the current attacks on education, as well as their roots in neoliberal ideology.[18]

For the corporate world, education is a multibillion-dollar industry that has somehow escaped the grips of privatization and the market. As one report put out by Merrill Lynch, argues:

> A new mindset is necessary, one that views families as customers, schools as "retail outlets" where educational services are received, and the school board as a customer service department that hears and addresses parental concerns. As a near monopoly, schools escape the strongest incentives to respond to their customers — the discipline of the market"[19]

The problem is of course, that learning is not a product that can be sold to pliable consumers. Nor can it be turned into chunks of data to be easily measured on bubble tests. The biggest problem with the anti-teacher rhetoric that dominates discussions of education today is that it relies on an image of teachers as self-sacrificing martyrs who singlehandedly can overcome the vast inequalities that plague our society and can nurture all students to their full potential even if they lack healthcare, housing, or food.

This conception of teaching is inherently unhealthy, unsustainable, and impossible. It is a recipe for a revolving door of teachers who are used up and spit up — and as such, it has disastrous consequences for our schools.

The blame-the-teacher rhetoric that is so popular in the media is ultimately a diversion from the real problems in education today: the systematic underfunding of our neediest schools, the continued (and increased) segregation of schools, and the mass inequality and growing gap between rich and poor which leaves all poor children behind.

Turning the Tide

DESPITE THE DISMAL NATIONAL SCENE for teachers, there are glimmers of hope. The recent ousting of Cathie Black in New York City is cause for celebration — no matter how little impact it will have on actual educational policies. As Chancellor of New York City's Schools, Black quickly became the ultimate symbol of the gap between educators and the corporate elite policy makers who in Black's

case had never spent a day in a public school and yet was deemed qualified to run the system. She was the insult added to years of injuries. Through her complete disdain for parents, students and teachers — from mocking parents at a Panel for Educational Policy to advocating birth control to reduce overcrowding, she became the Marie Antoinette of public education. Her stunning demise was a black eye for the corporate education deformers and a sign that there is a limit to the public's tolerance for the corporate education agenda.

But, it is Wisconsin above all that showed the way forward, making it clear that this is no longer a one-sided war. The mass protests, occupation of the Capitol, and sick-outs that swept Wisconsin were a first step in turning the tide against a one-sided war in which teachers and other public sector unions were being decimated. While teachers in Wisconsin did not succeed in preventing Walker's bill from passing, they fundamentally changed the terrain of public debate and public opinion in this country.

Clearly, we have a massive fight on our hands, but Wisconsin shows that resistance is possible, worthwhile, and necessary.

Footnotes

1. *Time* Poll Results: Americans' Views on Teacher Tenure, Merit Pay and Other Education Reform, April 13, 2011.

2. Jonathan Mahler, "The Deadlocked Debate Over Education Reform," *The New York Times* April 9, 2011, accessed on 4-15-11.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Cited by Marjorie Murphy in *Blackboard Unions: The AFT& the NEA 1900-1980*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.56.

5. Paul Thomas, "The agenda behind teacher union-bashing," *The Guardian,* Friday February 4, 2011. (accessed April 4, 2011).

6. Matthew Di Carlo, cited by Valerie Strauss in "The real effect of teachers union contracts" on "The Answer Sheet: A School Survival Guide for Parents (and Everyone Else)" published at *washingtonpost.com.* 10/25/2010, 4/13/2011.

7. *Ibid*.

8. Donald J. Hernandez, *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation* published by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 4/13/2011.

9.*Ibid.*

10. Sharon Otterman, "Closing Schools Have Most Challenging Demographics" from the City Room blog on *The New York Times* online. January 26, 2011. 4/13/ 2011.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Schochet, Peter Z. and Hanley S. Chiang (2010). Error Rates in Measuring Teacher and School Performance Based on Student Test Score Gains (NCEE 2010-4004), Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S.

Department of Education., 4/13/2011.

13. *Ibid*.

14. Cited by Sarah Knopp in "A Teacher Pushed to the Edge," *SocialistWorker.org* October 1, 2010.

15. Raj Chetty et al. "How Does Your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings? Evidence From Project Star,".

16. Melanie Moran, "Teacher performance pay alone does not raise student test scores – New Vanderbilt study find," April 15, 2011.

17. See Alfie Kohn *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999).

18. See Lois Weiner & Mary Compton (eds), *The Global Assault On Teaching, Teachers, and their Unions:* Stories for Resistance (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

19. *Ibid*., 4