Mediocrity in teacher education?

written by Lois Weiner | October 30, 2013

Bill Keller's op/ed piece in the NY Times about the mediocrity in teacher education deserved a political rebuttal that responses in the "letters" section didn't provide. My letter, rejected, slipped in my doctoral work at Harvard and my book on urban teaching, which in the past has allowed my radical critique to pass as credible.

> During my doctoral work in teacher education at Harvard in 1990, I took a seminar in which we studied policies right-wing think tanks advocated for teacher preparation and certification. Almost all of those policies have since become law, with bipartisan support. Now Bill Keller advocates for yet another change that the far-right has thirsted after for decades, destroying university-based teacher education by raising entrance requirements so that only college students from families with high socio-economic status can become teachers. This policy parallels the aim of Teach for America – another program we studied just as it was hatched. Teacher ed's crime in the eyes of these opponents is preparing prospective teachers to care about the whole child and understand the role of schools in a democracy. I plead guilty as charged. (Lois Weiner is the author of "Urban Teaching: The Essentials")

Keller's article is part of a well-orchestrated campaign to eliminate teacher education at state universities, what were once normal schools, then state teachers colleges, as this presentation by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) explains. NCTQ, like so many "non-profits" and foundations funded by far-right donors, now drives teacher education policy in the federal government and at the state level.

Don't we want teachers who are well-educated themselves? Absolutely. That's my life's work, as well as doing what I can as a teacher educator to make sure that teachers are "dream keepers" not "gate keepers" for children who have not been given equal educational opportunity. But as Ken Zeichner explains that's not what the changes to teacher education are doing, especially with shoddy "fast-track" programs to plop newbies into schools to work with kids with the most needs.. How many people who are well-educated will remain in school systems that serve kids who don't do well on standardized tests when teacher pay and evaluations are pegged to students' test scores? How many people with other career options will work in a job with no professional supports, no job security, with low pay, where the supervisor hires and fires at will? Not many.

So what will happen if/when we cut off the pipeline of teachers to a trickle? Politicians will likely do what they always have when there is a teacher shortage: waive requirements to put warm bodies in classrooms. There will likely be plenty of people in this "jobless recovery" who will want work. It's an outcome the World Bank points to as a model, noting approvingly that this is what occurred in Benin when teachers had the audacity to ask the government to consider a pay raise and were fired wholesale.

In every neoliberal reform I can think of, to understand what the impact (intended or not) will be, use one of these semantic devices: invert the meaning or add “for a select few.” Thus, the goal of “raising teacher quality” by restricting admission to teacher education program to only those who have the highest SAT scores will have the effect of “putting minimally qualified teachers into most schools” or “raising teacher quality for a select few.” So don’t be surprised that the debt ceiling legislation included a provision to allow “alternate route” teachers to bypass all the regulations for university-based programs.

I am heartened that more activists have been persuaded by my argument that this is not a conspiracy because conspiracies are, by definition, secret. This is a global project with quite public documentation and exegesis. The evidence is in front of us. The problem is that many liberals don’t want to face that we are in an ideological battle with enemies who aim to destroy public education and democracy. The only way to “engage” (to quote a teacher union official with whom I often tweet) with our enemies, and this includes the Democrats as well as the Republicans, is to defeat them using all our strength and savvy.

I invite reader responses, either to New Politics as a blog or to me directly at drweinerlo@gmail.com. Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow my thoughts on teaching, schools, and education on twitter , Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.