An open letter to Frank Bruni about tenure for NYC teachers

written by Lois Weiner | August 19, 2014

Dear Frank Bruni,

I enjoyed your restaurant reviews in the NY Times. Reading your descriptions of the food and ambience allowed me to experience vicariously many restaurants. We seem to have a similar sensibility — about food. You seemed not to allow restaurant publicity and PR to influence your ratings or judgment, maybe because you know good food and the restaurant business thoroughly enough so that you could see through hype.

But that's not the case in your columns on educational issues, in particular your analysis of tenure, which reads like the talking points from Teach for America and Students First, groups funded by billionaires who aim to transform schooling in ways they think best – that is, best for them and profits.

All of us who have attended schools have some knowledge of education. This is a good starting point for participating in a democratic debate about what schools should be in our society. However, our experiences as students provides us with knowledge that is partial. Evidence and ideas from researchers, parents, community members, citizens, teachers are all needed in this debate. Unfortunately, those driving US education policy have embarked on a project to destroy the school system that has existed for more than a century, replacing it with one that is based on "free market" principles, mandating reforms that have not succeeded in equalizing educational outcomes anywhere in the world. In fact, when we look at the global south where these ideas were field-tested by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, we see shocking declines in literacy rates and other educational outcomes.

Although I can and will provide research supporting the arguments I make in this letter, since you use anecdote to explain your case, I'll draw on my own experience as a teacher to explain why tenure as it exists in NYC and NY state is essential to provide students who most need high-quality schools and teaching what they deserve. I graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with honors in journalism. I received my MA in teaching English from Teachers College at Columbia University, attending on a full scholarship for a select number of experienced teachers. I taught for five years in CA and two years in NY suburbs, including one of the wealthiest in the nation. My teaching references were stellar and I was by any objective measure used in evaluating teachers a superior, even extraordinary teacher of English. I won the job in the elite public system over more than 500 applicants to an ad in the NY Times.

I wanted to be NYC teacher because this is where the real challenge is for many of us committed to social justice, racial equality, and teaching. So I took a 35% pay cut and taught in two NYC schools, both of which were considered "failing." In 9 years of city teaching I worked under 6 principals. Without the protections in the union contract (and state law), I would have been dismissed by 4 of my principals, although my department heads considered my performance superior. Why? Because I was an independent thinker and, if I may be frank, much better educated about pedagogy and more analytical than my principals. I was always able to point to research that supported my teaching decisions. Moreover, I was admired and respected for my dedication and skill by students, colleagues, and parents. I had superb credentials. My expertise and confidence made

me a serious threat to administrators who were pressured by their superiors to enforce regulations that were damaging to our students.

Need an example of these policies that sabotaged good teaching and student success? How about ten? I have so much to say about this I could write a book – and did. In fact, two. My first book, based on my doctoral work at Harvard, won one the most prestigious awards in educational research. The second is used in urban teacher education programs throughout the country.

As a high school English teacher and reporter for my college newspaper, I volunteered to advise our school newspapers. In that role I wouldn't have permitted my student writers to publish a piece with as little background work as you did in your tenure column. They had to do research, consult with people who had contradictory opinions and were considered experts in the field. Had you done your research you would have learned that the assault on tenure is as well-orchestrated and as spurious as the overblown publicity for those luxury restaurants you pilloried. You've fallen for the disinformation campaign and in publishing your column have done harm to kids who most need good teachers who will protect them.

I encourage you to investigate why so many researchers support laws that provide teachers with due process, protection from administrators' spurious complaints, and tenure. You'll be surprised at how much you've missed.