

Pitting students against teachers

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In California a legal battle is being fought that has political implications for teachers everywhere. It's being cast - incorrectly - as a confrontation between teachers' jobs and students' rights.

Appropriating the rhetoric of the civil rights movement, powerful elites who want to control what is taught and how, so as to privatize education and control what is taught and how, have established front groups, like "Students First" to advance their aims. "Students First" has filed a case in California to eliminate tenure and professional protections teachers have when they are found to be ineffective.

What those of us who want to protect public education have to say first - loudly and clearly - is that the kinds of statements made by teachers being put into testimony in the Vergara case are not ones we as a profession or a society can accept. I don't defend the right of a teacher to tell a student that she has no future. What I do defend is the right of a teacher accused of having made disrespectful, damaging remarks the same common sense protections that we give anyone accused of a crime, most importantly the need for evidence that the incident occurred as reported. This protection is the only way to prevent witch hunts. Frightened teachers produce frightened children. Tenure protects teachers and in so doing it protects children. Conditions in schools sabotage teachers' best efforts to reach all kids. I explain this more fully in my book on urban teaching and can't give the topic the attention it so deserves in a blog. We should be clear that the anti-teachers union, anti-teacher changes "Students First" is pursuing in this lawsuit will do nothing to improve the conditions that lead to teachers acting in ways they ought not:

"Urban schools are notorious for the poor quality of their professional development; more often than not inservice workshops are useless, even insulting. Teachers see that their ideas are not valued or respected, and in response many stop struggling to make themselves heard. They have so often been ordered to use a new curriculum or method that they become skeptical about all change."

Teachers can fall into the trap of blaming students and parents for the school system's and the society's failures - just as teachers are now themselves being made scape goats for everything that schools and our government should do but don't. To fight back against the pernicious attack on public education we have to be clear that students and parents are our most important allies. They are not responsible for the root causes of poor schooling, which are what we need to change.

Don't be fooled by the rhetoric. Vergara is using a real problem to advance aims that will destroy the promise of a quality education for the kids who most need it. The case is not about improving schools but eliminating the chance for all kids to attend schools that will support and nurture them.

I invite reader responses at drweinerlo@gmail.com. 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.