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NATIONAL NEWS

Opinion: No more blame game on teachers

Washington Post

By: Editorial Board

May 5, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/no-more-blame-game-on-teachers/2011/05/03/AFOV5A2F_story.html

This is National [Teachers Appreciation Week](#). According to the leaders of the nation's teachers unions, it's come none too soon. In their telling, teachers are being unfairly faulted as never before — even demonized — for the problems in today's schools.

We agree that teachers should be applauded and that society often doesn't reward them sufficiently. But much of the buzz about demonization is coming from the unions themselves, which confuse criticism of union policies with criticism of teachers. We worry that they're setting up a straw man that distracts attention from discussion about what's needed to improve learning.

A radio ad timed to this week's celebration, featuring National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel, laments how teachers are being scapegoated. Randi Weingarten, head of the American Federation of Teachers, penned a [column](#) for the Wall Street Journal last week that hailed how other countries "revere and respect their teachers; they don't demonize them."

To be sure, there has been criticism of unions and a reexamination of collective bargaining agreements seen as overly generous; Wisconsin and Ohio were engulfed by debate over labor rights featuring some overheated and unfortunate rhetoric. But most people — including harsh critics of public schools — recognize the importance of teaching and the hard work done each day in countless classrooms.

What the unions seem to see as blaming teachers is the suggestion that teachers should be retained or not, promoted or not, rewarded more or less, based in part on whether their students learn. The NEA has bitterly fought performance pay tied to student test scores, and Ms. Weingarten, generally more supportive of new ideas about teacher compensation, seemed to be sounding a bit of a retreat in her Journal column, citing a study that shows "rewarding teachers with bonus pay does not raise student test scores." Ms. Weingarten disputed to us any suggestion that she's backtracking on reforms, explaining that she is guided by empirical data on what works.

Union leaders are right that many factors go into successful learning. There is a need for more and better-quality preschool programs; a better job must be done in recruiting and retaining top college students as teachers; and the poverty that afflicts many of America's children cannot be ignored. It's also true that everyone in a school — music teachers, custodians, principals — plays a role, and reading and math tests alone can't provide a full picture of that.

But if some fourth-grade teachers consistently help their students advance in math and reading more than other teachers, why wouldn't we want to reward the successful ones and encourage them to stay in the profession? The current lock-step system of

pay provides little incentive to the brightest and most creative people who might be thinking of entering or staying in the profession.

Teacher evaluations should be fair and transparent, conditions that have not always been present in past systems. But if anyone is demonizing teachers, it's those who won't treat them as professionals — who believe all teachers should earn the same pay, and get the same raise, no matter how much harder they work or how much more some of them accomplish. We think teachers deserve a different sort of appreciation and respect.

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Cornering the Market in Common-Standards Curriculum?

Education Week

By: Catherine Gewertz

May 5, 2011

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2011/05/cornering_the_market_in_common.html

Last week's announcement that the Gates and Pearson foundations are teaming up to provide online curriculum for the common standards has prompted interesting new rounds of dialogue. We reported some folks' reservations in our [story](#), but more are still ricocheting around the blogosphere.

Take, for instance, a post by *EdWeek* opinion blogger Diane Ravitch, who cites the Gates-Pearson deal as the "[outrage of the week](#)." The [comments section](#) of Ravitch's post neatly captures key strains in the debate about developing curriculum for the common standards: resentment about the roles of corporations, big foundations, or the federal government; worry about too little teacher participation in developing common curriculum (although the AFT went out of its way to [point out](#) that its own teachers will be involved in the Gates-Pearson work); recognition that teachers need help with curriculum, but varying views on the best ways to respond to those needs. Many teachers are [worried, too](#), about how such curricula will restrict their professional judgment and creativity.

One strain of concern I heard as I reported the story was the aspect of the Gates-Pearson arrangement that seemed to give Pearson, the for-profit company, the right to market the 24-course sequence to be developed by the Gates and Pearson foundations. Chris Tebben, the executive director of Grantmakers for Education, a group of education funders, told me that while the foundation-corporate linkage represents an increasingly popular kind of "market-based thinking" in philanthropy, as funders seek ways to better scale up their ideas, it also raises concerns about "advantaging" one large education company. That concern is shared by [others](#), as well.

I decided to run this idea by the Pearson Foundation. Foundation President Mark Nieker told me that there is, as yet, no firm exclusivity agreement in place with the Pearson company. The idea, he said, is to ensure the course sequence has "wide distribution," so the Pearson Foundation would "distribute it with whatever partners we thought would give it the best chance of being used."

None of this, of course, will resolve arguments about the role of the marketplace in education. One example that went round this week: Colorado education professor Kevin Welner, [arguing](#) in the current issues of *Dissent* magazine that "educational opportunities should therefore never be distributed by market forces, because markets exist to create inequalities¹⁵¹; they thrive by creating 'winners' and 'losers,'" and the Flypaper blog's Chris Tessone, [arguing](#) that a market-based approach affords more choice and customization for a varied student population.

The Gates-Pearson work certainly isn't the first entree into common-core curriculum development (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and won't be the last, even as folks disagree on [what the heck "curriculum" means](#). The field is getting increasingly crowded. Who is crowding it and what they're creating are sure to be topics of interest and argument for a good long while.

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2 Images of Schools Chief in Dealing With Unions

New York Times

By: Crystal Yednak and Rebecca Vevea

May 5, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/06/us/06cncbrizard.html?_r=1&ref=education

Since Jean-Claude Brizard was selected as chief of Chicago Public Schools, scrutiny of his record has focused largely on his tenure as superintendent of schools in Rochester, N.Y., where he earned a reputation as an administrator who alienated union members but pleased the city's corporate community.

But in the New York City school system, where Mr. Brizard spent the bulk of his career, the union representative who worked most closely with him described Mr. Brizard as an executive who put his agenda first but collaborated with union leaders and was scrupulous in following rules for dismissing ineffective teachers.

A decade ago Mr. Brizard, now Mayor-elect [Rahm Emanuel](#)'s choice to run Chicago's 675 public schools, was a rookie principal in New York. He had a daunting mandate: remake a troubled vocational high school in Brooklyn that had been given one last

chance to avoid closing.

That school, George Westinghouse High, was described as chaotic by both Mr. Brizard and Louis Esposito, the school's union chapter leader at the time. They said it was clinging to outdated vocational programs, training students for jobs that had become difficult to find. Students controlled the violent hallways, and administrators struggled to deal with incompetent teachers, Mr. Esposito said.

"It needed order, it needed control, and that's what he did," Mr. Esposito said.

In Chicago, Mr. Brizard will start as an outsider, but at Westinghouse, he rose through the ranks from teacher to assistant principal to principal. "I tell people I grew up at Westinghouse high school," Mr. Brizard said in an interview this week.

As principal, Mr. Brizard led Westinghouse through a transformation to a more up-to-date curriculum and offered teachers the chance to be retrained to teach it. Not every staff member embraced the changes, and eventually about one-quarter of the teaching staff was removed.

Mr. Brizard seemed to have had the union contract memorized, Mr. Esposito said, and followed protocol in dismissing problem staff members. He also collaborated with Mr. Esposito and won his support for removing problem teachers.

"I felt included on a daily basis," Mr. Esposito said. "He made a smart move in that way, as opposed to shutting me out and making me feel like we were at war."

When Mr. Brizard took over in Rochester, he tried the same approach, according to news reports, encouraging administrators to become thoroughly acquainted with the union contract to better document the removal of ineffective teachers. But his relationship with the union soon soured.

Mr. Brizard said he was particularly sensitive to the removal process at Westinghouse because he had been a teacher at the school. "Having to document the termination for someone who was a colleague was difficult," he said.

Of course, Mr. Brizard and Mr. Esposito did not always agree as they worked through the school's transition.

"But when we had a disagreement, he was open to what I said and my opinions," Mr. Esposito said, "and we worked it through."

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FLORIDA NEWS

Lawmakers took 'wrecking ball' to Florida schools, union chief says

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

May 5, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-randi-weingarten-visit-20110505.0.7678236.story>

The Orange County school district shines as an example of the "good that's going on in education" despite "tragic" budget cuts and an effort by Tallahassee power brokers to demoralize and denigrate teachers, union leader Randi Weingarten said Thursday.

Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, spent Thursday in Orange, touring two schools and meeting with school union leaders from around Central Florida.

Weingarten praised Orange for persuading voters in November to pass a property-tax increase that should mean an \$83 million infusion to local coffers.

That money will help insulate Orange schools from deep state budget cuts approved by lawmakers this week. Lawmakers are slashing spending for public schools by \$1.35 billion.

"There's a sense of public confidence in public education in Orange County," she said.

Orange Superintendent of Schools Ron Blocker said getting noticed and visited by the Washington, D.C.-based union official was a nice recognition for his district.

"We're doing something special," he added.

While praising Orange educators, Weingarten, a former New York City teachers-union leader, was sharply critical of the Florida Legislature and Gov. Rick Scott, whom she accused of taking "a wrecking ball" to the academic progress Florida has made.

Though not all teachers agreed with all facets of the state's reform efforts in the past decade — pushed initially by former Gov. Jeb Bush — most embraced the effort to improve public education, she said.

And across the country, Florida gained notice for improved test scores, better national rankings and winning a share of the federal Race to the Top grant last year.

"There was a real sense of Florida schools moving in the right direction," she said.

Although she agrees that public education must continue to change and improve so that all students can compete in a "knowledge economy," she said the sweeping merit-pay law Florida approved this spring won't do that, nor will deep cuts to school spending plans.

Weingarten has supported efforts to change teacher-evaluation systems and employment policies to allow districts to get rid of ineffective teachers more quickly. But she said such efforts need to involve teachers, not be imposed upon them by state lawmakers.

"We will do our part. We will change," she added. "We will focus relentlessly on what is good for kids and what is fair for teachers because they're essentially the same thing."

Weingarten decided to visit Central Florida after hearing about Ocoee Middle School, which has earned national attention for using technology to engage adolescents, and Fern Creek Elementary, whose efforts to help homeless students earned it a recent column in The New York Times.

Weingarten's union represents 1.5 million teachers and other workers. The Florida Education Association, Florida's statewide teachers union, is a joint affiliate of the AFT and the National Education Association.

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STATE NEWS

Opinion: Newark's new superintendent, Cami Anderson: A capable woman who will need a lot of help

New Jersey Star-Ledger

By: Editorial Board

May 05, 2011

http://blog.nj.com/njv_editorial_page/2011/05/newarks_new_superintendent_a_c.html

Politics in Newark is not for wimps. Because when you propose change in this city, even when it's clearly needed, you can count on ferocious push-back. It happened to Cory Booker when he took over city hall. It happened to Garry McCarthy when he took over the police department. And it will surely happen to Cami Anderson, the woman chosen this week as Newark's superintendent of schools.

So let's take a moment to root for her success, and maybe even give her the benefit of the doubt if she stumbles a few times out of the gate. Newark's success now hinges on her success.

The enormous challenges she faces are matched by the enormous opportunity. It's not just the potential for \$200 million in Facebook money to grease reforms. It is the growing impatience with the failure of the public schools in the city. When 4,000 families join a waiting list at the TEAM charters, and hundreds line up overnight to get into Ann Street school, you can't question the city's thirst for something better.

And there is growing support for key reforms, like expanding charter schools and establishing more innovative schools within the traditional system. Like reforming teacher tenure and training, closing down failing schools, and holding adults everywhere accountable for student performance.

Luckily, Anderson has walked this walk before. As the former head of alternative schools in New York City, she worked effectively with the teacher's union and community groups to overhaul the city's GED program, and smoothed the way for traditional schools to share space with experimental ones. She closed the last of the dismal schools for pregnant students, despite pushback, and invested in better programs for teenage parents in regular high schools.

Our hope is that Anderson is prepared in the end to knock her head through brick walls to create change. Because Newark kids need a fighter. At high schools like Malcolm X Shabazz, the majority of 11th graders fail proficiency tests in both math and reading. Overall, the system graduates only about half of the kids who enter high school.

That has to change. And to get it done, Anderson is going to need support and respect from all sides. We wish her, and the city, good luck.

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Report: State Involvement Helping Conn. Schools

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 5, 2011

<http://www.wfsb.com/news/27792167/detail.html>

HARTFORD, Conn. -- Student achievement is improving in 15 Connecticut school districts since state educators started helping them bolster their [curriculum](#) and teacher training, according to a new report.

The state Department of Education's report says students in those struggling districts made noticeable progress, particularly in reading, since the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative started four years ago.

"Everybody is making growth. That's the story here. Every single student," Heather Levitt Doucette, a consultant with the department, told the state Board of Education when it reviewed the report Wednesday.

The improvement program, known as CALI, stems from a 2007 law intended to help close the achievement gap between Connecticut's wealthy and poor students, and between ethnic minorities and their white counterparts.

The program lets the state step in to help struggling local school districts by updating their curriculum and providing more professional development for teachers.

One district, Windham, will get extra intervention starting this summer when a special master is appointed to work with the school board and administrators. Connecticut Interim Education Commissioner George Coleman said similar steps might be taken in other districts. CALI started with 12 districts in 2008 and now has 18, including those in Connecticut's largest cities and some blue-collar suburbs. The 18 districts represent 30 percent of the state's black and Hispanic population.

The new report says students statewide made steady improvement on the Connecticut Mastery Test over the last four years, but that trend has been accelerated in the 15 districts involved in the CALI program during that period.

For instance, Hispanic third-graders' reading scores improved from 38 percent at the proficient level in 2007 to 65 percent in 2010. In math, Mastery Test scores went from 64 percent to 71 percent at or above proficiency in the CALI districts.

Education department officials say the results are so promising that they predict all students will achieve proficiency in reading on the Connecticut Mastery Tests by 2014.

The original CALI districts are Ansonia, Bridgeport, Danbury, East Hartford, Hartford, Meriden, Middletown, New Britain, New Haven, New [London](#), Norwalk, Norwich, Stamford, Waterbury and Windham.

Windsor, Hamden and West Haven were added last fall to the CALI oversight program, but their [performance](#) was not included in the new report because their participation was so recent.

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Proposed tax credit in Oklahoma for private school scholarships could go to wealthy

The Oklahoman

By: Megan Rolland

May 6, 2011

<http://newsok.com/proposed-tax-credit-in-oklahoma-for-private-school-scholarships-could-go-to-wealthy/article/3565243>

A proposed tax credit, touted as an opportunity for low-income children to attend a private school of their choice on a scholarship, would be available to any middle-class family in [Oklahoma](#) and many wealthy families as well.

Senate Bill 969 offers individuals and corporations a tax credit for up to half of the amount they donate to a private scholarship fund. The agencies overseeing the donations must be nonprofits and will have say over which students receive it.

The bill, which passed the Senate on Thursday and is headed to the governor, bases student qualification for the scholarships on households with an income of less than 300 percent the "free or reduced price lunch" threshold.

A family of four qualifies for reduced price lunch with an annual income of \$40,793, but 300 percent of that increases the threshold for the tax credit scholarships to \$122,379.

Even if the law were based on the income level to qualify for free meals, \$28,665 for a family of four, it still would allow a family with an annual income of \$85,995 to qualify for the scholarship.

"Thirty-two thousand of our students live at less than half of that amount of money," said [Karl Springer](#), superintendent of the state's largest school district where most of the students qualify for free and reduced priced lunch. "Yet the legislation is being marketed as a way to serve our at-risk children."

The median household income in Oklahoma, according to 2009 estimates by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) is \$41,664.

"I'm not for or against this piece of legislation," Springer said. "But I'd like to have it set up so that kids who are most at risk have a chance to have it."

Level of protection

Author of the bill [Sen. Dan Newberry, R-Tulsa](#), said there is another level of protection in the bill to ensure the funds go to the most at-risk students.

He said the law requires nonprofits that are receiving the donations to award a majority of the scholarships to students who are low-income.

"The intention of the bill is really aimed to help those kids who can't change their circumstances easily. We're really trying to help those kids have a different educational opportunity," Newberry said.

The other way students can qualify for the scholarship is by living in the attendance zone of a school on the state designated list for school improvement determined by federal legislation.

"They don't actually have to go to the school, nor do they have to be poor to receive the voucher," Minority Leader Scott Inman, D-[Del City](#) said. "A family that lives in a \$400,000 brownstone in downtown [Oklahoma City](#), who would otherwise send their kids to Douglass, but they already send their kid to a private school, would be eligible to receive the voucher."

[Douglass Middle High School](#) was a school in need of improvement until 2010 when it improved enough to get off the list.

The scholarships are capped at \$5,000 per student, and the total amount of tax credits that can be claimed in a single year by corporations and individuals is \$3.5 million. Another \$1.5 million can be claimed for grants that will go to schools to widen their course offerings.

"If all \$5 million of scholarships are used that means they created \$10 million in gifts," Newberry said.

He said the nonprofits that award the scholarships will be required to pass along at least 90 percent of the donations directly to students. In states that already have the tax credit scholarships that pass-through rate is about 93 percent, he said.

Stories of abuses

Stories coming out of [Arizona](#), which has had a scholarship tax credit law in place for more than a decade, tell of parents swapping donations through nonprofits to benefit the other's children.

"It's a system that if the legislation isn't extremely meticulously worded ... it can allow for an incredible amount of profiteering at the expense of private tax dollars," said [Jen Darland](#), vice president of the Arizona Education Network, a group that actively opposes the tax credit system in Arizona.

Newberry said if there is any abuse of the system, they will come back and address it.

"I certainly hope that's not the case," he said. "We have tried to really rein down how those scholarships are awarded and who they can be awarded to."

Newberry also emphasized the Arizona's tax credit system was upheld by the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) last month in a 5-4 vote that some say opened the door for similar tax credits to be used across the nation. The challenge was whether the tax credits were unconstitutional because they relied on religious organizations.

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North Carolina House budget has state set school layoff policy

Associated Press

By: Staff

May 6, 2011

<http://www.wncn.com/news/politics/NC-House-budget-has-state-set-school-layoff-policy-121380729.html>

RALEIGH, N.C. – The budget just approved by the House includes a provision that makes the State Board of Education, not local boards, responsible for setting policy on how impending school layoffs will be handled.

One of the chief House budget-writers for education issues said Thursday the departure from the Republican ideal of local control came because lawmakers wanted to make rules on how layoffs are carried out as uniform as possible statewide.

"We just want them to put a policy out there that says the same thing," said Rep. Bryan Holloway, R-Stokes, a former teacher.

The 279-page House budget also would strip the right of tenured teachers to be the first rehired after a layoff, and directs school administrators to consider "work performance" when laying off people in similar positions.

Lee County school board member Bill Tatum doesn't like the directives buried in the first budget drawn by Republicans since they took over control of the General Assembly after last November's broad election victories.

"With the leadership in Raleigh now, wanting to have a businesslike approach to state government and give additional autonomy and flexibility to local boards, buried in this legislation is (something) doing just the opposite," he said.

"The conditions in one location are different from another, particularly in a metropolitan area and a rural area," said Tatum, a

retired concrete company operations director. "The board of education in Alleghany County knows best what's good for Alleghany County and the board in Charlotte-Mecklenburg understands that the needs of Charlotte-Mecklenburg are totally different."

The House budget doesn't specify how many schoolhouse jobs will be lost because of its spending cuts, leaving local districts many of the decisions of what to slice and what to keep. The budget cuts more than \$360 million for teacher assistants, janitors, clerical workers, assistant principals, and programs that work with at-risk and academically gifted students.

The North Carolina Association of Educators, which represents teachers and other school employees, contends the job losses over this summer could top 18,000. Holloway and other Republicans say that's wildly overstated, since local school boards will have budget flexibility to minimize layoffs and county governments can chip in more than they do now.

House Speaker Thom Tillis, R-Mecklenburg, said Thursday he was unfamiliar with the language on who decides school layoffs policy, but that a change was likely as the Senate works up its version of the state's two-year spending plan.

"If we think it's inconsistent with the idea of providing greater flexibility, it will come out in the Senate," he said.

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