

**Teachers Network Leadership Institute
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Searching For Common Ground in Education Reform: A Teacher's Voice

Research Questions

- Can teachers agree on common goals in the education reform debate?
- Can teachers agree on a professional platform that would speak to the rights of all children to learn and all teachers to teach?
- How can teachers effectively and professionally communicate their needs in the age of education reform?

Rationale

I am a member of TNLI and enjoy discussing educational policy with my colleagues, but often find myself frustrated at our apparent willingness to settle for the status quo or fall back upon the same tired rhetoric when it comes to improving learning conditions for students and teaching conditions for teachers. I am a member of the CTA, but cringe when I hear their media ads, which do not speak to the real issues of education and are weak, whiny and ultimately ineffective...or worse, do more harm than good. I read everything I can in the newspapers and educational publications, but am always much more sympathetic to education reformers than to the voice of the teachers, which is almost always being communicated by union representatives, who do not appear to speak for me. I love my job, and am fortunate to work in a school where I am provided with all the necessary components to achieve success with my students. I want that for all American children, and am interested in speaking up for them with a new voice. A positive, professional teacher's voice, speaking from experience, speaking up for what we need to succeed. And I was hoping to round up a few of you to come along for the ride!

Tools

- Interviews
 - Teachers
 - Administrators
 - Policy makers
- Literary review
- Personal experience

Data and Analysis

I was able to find common ground with teachers who I interviewed and with fellows of my local TNLI affiliate as far as goals for public school education in America. They are as follows:

- Education policy must focus on raising achievement for all students.
- All students must be able to read, write, and compute math problems.
- All students deserve high expectations.
- All students deserve a safe place to learn.
- All students deserve a trained effective teacher.
- All students deserve support so that success can be realized.
- All teachers deserve training and support so that success can be realized.
- All teachers and students deserve effective leadership.

Finding common ground on a professional platform for teachers in the ongoing debate proved more elusive and will be the focus of next year's research starting now. The literature, interviews with colleagues and my personal experience allowed me to create a list of ideas; a jumping off point that I intend build upon. And the most effective strategy to ultimately communicate the goals and platform will be my happy quest!

Policy Implications

Teachers need to effectively advocate for their needs in the interest of student achievement and professional respect.

The pilot list follows:

- Teachers need effective training programs.
- Teachers need effective leadership.
- Teachers need adequate compensation.
- Teachers need to embrace standards and testing.
- Teachers need to demand the right to exercise creative freedom.
- Teachers need classroom support.
- Teachers need to admit that not every teacher is satisfactory.

Yes We Can: A Teacher's Voice

By Linda Edwards

June 2009

The education debate goes something like this:

Reformers want accountability. (Klein, 2009)

Teachers complain about teaching to the test. (California Educator, 2009)

Reformers blame bad teachers. (Ripley, 2008, p. 36-44)

Teachers' unions protect bad teachers. (L.A. Times, 2009)

Reformers want quality teachers in every classroom. (Ripley, 2008)

Teacher training programs are not preparing teachers to teach. (Zehr, 2009)

Reformers attempt to offer choice. (Keller, 2009)

Teachers fight vouchers and charter schools. (Keller, 2009)

Reformers want data driven spending. (Klein, 2009)

Teachers ask for more money but fight accountability measures. (Ripley, 2008)

Reformers want academic rigor. (Klein, 2009)

Teachers favor critical thinking. (California Educator, 2009)

Reformers suggest merit pay. (Duncan, 2009)

Teachers fear unfair evaluation procedures. (Ripley, 2008)

Reformers hope to attract effective teachers to failing schools. (Duncan, 2009)

Teachers won't touch them with a 10-foot pole. (Rossi, 2009)

And who wins? No one.

Not teachers, who are under compensated, demoralized and disrespected by many Americans. Not children, especially poor children, who have no choice but to attend failing schools where crime is rampant, learning is non-existent, and so is hope. Not society who is failing in its effort to educate the next generation of leaders. (Kristoff, 2009)

I am a teacher. I love what I do and I'm good at it. I also have everything I need in order for children to learn...a safe neighborhood, supportive parents, a schoolwide discipline policy supported by the principal, adequate supplies and an instructional aide in my classroom every morning. I also have the trust and respect of my principal and my clients. Clients? Yes clients. The students and their parents are the consumers in the profession I have chosen. I work for them. They need to be happy with what I do. And they are.

The students at my school score very well on California's standardized tests. In other words, they can read and write. They can add and subtract. They are empowered with knowledge and choices for the future. And I want that for every child in the United States of America.

I am encouraged by what I read, and hopeful for the future of public education. President Obama supports academic rigor and quality teachers. He supports accountability and the use of data to drive instruction and effective educational policy. He has championed choice for all children as he supports the charter school option. His selection for secretary of education, Arne Duncan, reflects a commitment to systemic reform. (Duncan, 2009)

But where are the teachers? If our voice is heard at all, it sounds weak and whiny. We complain about teaching kids to bubble in test booklets and No Child Left Behind. (Tough, 2008) We ask for more money, but balk at accountability measures. We refuse to acknowledge that there are inadequate teachers in classrooms. (Ferriter, 2009) We rue the mass exodus to charter schools, (Lehigh, 2009) and we dismiss the basics as

irrelevant to a 21st century education. (Ripley, 2008) Our voice is ineffective, unprofessional, and rightfully ignored. I want teachers to shout from the rooftops and let everyone know what we need to succeed. We know. We are there in the trenches. We are the professionals. We are passionate about what we do, and most of us are good at it.

The drumbeat for education reform is strong and persistent. And it's not going away. Rather, it's getting louder and more insistent. The movement began in 1983 with a report titled, "A Nation at Risk," which highlighted the dismal standing of American students when compared to those from other developed countries, and there is a sense that reform efforts to date have failed to correct the problem. (Finn, 2008) There is widespread dissatisfaction and a lack of confidence in the public school system as a whole. Furthermore, there exists a pervasive belief that poor children do not enjoy equal access to education in our country. (Ripley, 2008)

The Obama administration has signaled its vision for reform. Secretary Duncan has called for an educational philosophy that puts the needs of children first; one that is based on academic rigor, clear standards and accountability. It calls for the use of data to drive instruction, teacher quality and the allocation of education dollars to provide incentives. (Klein, 2009) This reform agenda is supported by more and more politicians and prominent business and community leaders. Mayors are taking over failing school districts and governors are beginning to weigh in with measures to improve student achievement. (Wall Street Journal, 2009) Newspapers around the country, regardless of ideological bent, are calling for change. Nicholas Kristoff, a New York Times columnist, writes, "Education reform could be the most potent anti-poverty program in the country...Unless we succeed in that effort, and get more students through high school

and into college, no bank bailout or stimulus package will be enough to preserve America's global leadership in the long run." (Kristoff, 2009) Thomas Friedman, author of *The World is Flat*, writes, "We need to get going immediately," when referencing the competition our young people will face in the future job market. And Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft laments, "In the international competition to have the biggest and best supply of knowledge workers, America is falling behind." (Friedman, 2005) There is a sense of urgency to the matter.

And yet, what do we hear from teachers? What suggestions do we have to offer? What ideas do we bring the table? When I hear a teacher's voice at all, it is the voice of the union. I am a member of the California Teacher's Association because it is a requirement for my job. But unions do not speak for me. In fact, I am often embarrassed by what I hear from them, hoping against hope that people do not associate their rhetoric with me. I know that there are others who agree with me, but it's difficult to go against the flow. It's also impossible not to. The stakes are too high.

When I look at union websites, I find information on political action advocacy in favor of issues such as budget, class size, elimination of standardized tests, revamping or elimination of No Child Left Behind, and national healthcare reform. I find an article titled, "In The Age of Testing, Can We Teach Critical Thinking?" I find information on a boycott of periodic assessments organized by the UTLA, the Los Angeles teachers' union, allegedly because they take too much time and cost too much.

In Boston, the union is furious because the mayor has recently embraced charter schools in the interest of reform, and at least in part due to, "the myopic resistance to change displayed by the Boston Teachers' Union." (Lehigh, 2009) They also demanded

an end to a contract with Teach For America, in an effort to stem teacher layoffs. (Vaznis, 2009) In New York City, the union fought the chancellor's desire to use student test scores as a factor in tenure decisions and lamented that they felt a lack of respect and confidence on his part. The union president released a survey citing the teachers' strong disapproval of Klein, and advocated a "focus on the whole child, not simply on test results." (Gootman, 2008) In Washington, the union mounted a successful campaign, spending over a million dollars, to defeat a charter school initiative that would have offered choice to poor children in failing public schools. (Hovde, 2004) In Washington D.C., Chancellor Michelle Rhee proposed a new contract with the teachers that would have allowed them to keep their tenure and receive a raise, or to give it up and be evaluated on the basis of how well their students were learning, in exchange for the opportunity to make up to \$131,000 a year. The union refused to submit the proposal for a vote by the members. (Ripley, 2008) In Chicago, a typical public school loses half of its teachers every five years. Teachers struggle with lack of parent support and discipline. They lament weak leadership and lack of input. (Rossi, 2009)

The Los Angeles Teachers' Union recently organized a boycott of periodic classroom assessments, claiming they were too time consuming and too expensive. Teachers refused to administer the tests, write letters of recommendation for students applying to college, or attend after school meetings. They complained about mountains of paperwork, and becoming "demoralized by tests that contradict the fundamentals of solid methodology." Instead they propose "authentic assessments" which are tailored to the needs of individual students. (Knopp, 2009) And of the LAUSD, the L.A. Times writes, "They put it off. They debated it at length and watered it down. And in the end,

the Los Angeles Unified school trustees barely passed a resolution asking the Legislature to make it a little easier to fire teachers accused of serious crimes. Mind you, not the ineffective ones who sleep in the classroom, ignore the curriculum and pass their unprepared students to the next grade. Just the ones who stand accused of abusing or molesting students. Union leaders warn that the legislature will never comply without their stamp of approval, and they're probably right. Failure to put the interests of children over the power of unions is characteristic of California education policy." (Los Angeles Times, 2009)

Negative, unprofessional whining. Politics. Stalemate.

These highly publicized actions take place against a backdrop of successful reform. The movement is gaining momentum, yet teachers appear to be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. The public is weary of the ongoing, often rancorous clash between reformers and unions, which "often comes across as ideological self-preservation for both camps...imagine the creative solutions and ideas we might have if we talked about a national learning agenda for all Americans." (Barringer, 2009)

As teachers, we should be at the forefront of the reform movement. We should be advocating for the rights of all children to learn and demanding the tools with which to achieve that critical goal. We should be constantly looking for examples of successful teachers and programs to emulate and strategies to implement. As a fellow of the Teacher Network Leadership Institute, I discuss educational policy with colleagues both locally and nationally. We approach the issues from various philosophical, demographic and socioeconomic perspectives. We have a great deal of respect for each other, and we

often disagree. But interestingly, at a recent meeting of our local affiliate, we were able to agree on the following educational truths to guide our policy discussion:

Education policy must focus on raising achievement for all students.

All students must be able to read, write, and compute math problems.

All students deserve high expectations.

All students deserve a safe place to learn.

All students deserve a trained effective teacher.

All students deserve support so that success can be realized.

All teachers deserve training and support so that success can be realized.

All teachers and students deserve effective leadership.

If our diverse and feisty little group can agree on these goals, then how difficult can it be for teachers to collectively voice an agenda for effective educational policy that promotes learning for all students? How do we get there from here? That is where our paths seem to diverge. But they should not. Our needs are simple. I have all the resources that I need, so I know. I speak from experience. I know what works. We need to replicate what works and discard or eliminate the factors that prevent us from reaching our goals. And we need to do it with a confident, professional voice. One worthy of respect. One that reflects experience, a positive attitude and a confidence born from the knowledge that our mission is critical and must be accomplished. With the following tools, teachers can teach and all children can learn:

Teachers need effective training programs. Linda Darling-Hammond laments the “constant attrition of under-prepared teachers that creates a harmful cycle in which students in poor schools are constantly learning from inexperienced, and less-effective

teachers.” Bill Cirone, superintendent of Santa Barbara County schools, cites “the disconnection of faculty expertise, teacher education courses and clinical experience from the realities of classrooms,” and calls for change. (Cirone, 2008)

I don’t know of any teachers who feel as if they were adequately trained by teacher certification programs to face the challenges of classroom life. I learned nothing from my credentialing program, and neither did my daughter, who attended one of the most highly acclaimed programs at a University of California campus. The best teachers I know agree that we wasted our time in education classes. We learned how to teach by doing it and from finding mentors and emulating their strategies. By professional collaboration. By sharing what works. By trying new ideas. By supporting each other and asking for needed support. And by putting our hearts and souls into what we do.

Much of what is taught in schools of education is research-based as opposed to practice-based. The majority of professors are scholars, not former teachers or administrators. They disseminate theories based on ideologies, but which do not work in all settings. (Davis, 2007) A recent study showed no advantage for students when taught by teachers who had been certified through a school of education as opposed to those who had followed alternative routes to the classroom. (Zehr, 2009) Wendy Kopp, president of Teach For America, believes that schools should look for, “individuals who had demonstrated in their past a high level of commitment and leadership; for those who demonstrate professionalism, effective communication styles and an educational approach consisting of high expectations for all students and sensitivity to diversity; and for those with a personality and philosophical approach that would be effective within the particular school.” Once hired, the candidates would receive training and ongoing

support commensurate with the individual situation. (Kopp, 2009) Arne Duncan has called for the use of student achievement data to discern which schools of education are preparing teachers to teach in the real world and ensure that students learn. (Duncan, 2009)

Teachers need effective leadership. Students cannot learn without a clear discipline policy backed up by the administration. Responsible leaders set the tone for high achievement, create an atmosphere of respect, preside over a safe campus, provide adequate classroom support and manage the effective allocation of resources. They have the mettle to purge unsatisfactory teachers and the confidence to allow excellent teachers to use their creative talents to ensure that students learn. They insist upon regular assessment of students to guide instruction, and provide for professional learning communities so that teachers are able to share information, offer valuable input, and support each other. An effective leader is not conflict averse. He or she is accountable for results and insists that student learning remain at center of the school culture.

Teachers need adequate compensation. Outstanding teachers are a valuable commodity. However, too often, they are lumped together with ineffective teachers when it comes to professional compensation. Teachers are paid on a salary schedule, and good teachers are paid the same as bad ones, due to the fact that the termination process is daunting, often unsuccessful and obscenely expensive. Therefore, most districts avoid it, causing bad teachers to be lumped in with the many good ones when funding and salary decisions are made. Currently, the only things that matter are how many years you have taught and how many units you have accumulated. Many teachers, myself included,

will never reach the top of the pay scale. In my district one needs to work for 30 years to arrive there.

In order to foster systemic change, teachers need to agree to one of two concepts: Insist that ineffective teachers be purged and the rest be paid a wage based on their value to society or allow themselves to be evaluated and compensated based on ability and results. Teachers in Washington D.C. claimed that Chancellor Rhee's two-track proposal undermined teachers who were in for the long term. (Ripley, 2008) I disagree. The opposite is in fact true. Talented teachers want to have the option of reaching the top of the career ladder more quickly in order to maximize earning capacity. Teachers need to be proactive and place themselves at the forefront of the compensation issue. They must provide workable ideas that might be agreeable to both sides, possibly using Allan Odden's concept of combining a predictable base pay with measures of student achievement and teaching performance as a starting point. (Odden, 2009) In its current state, teacher compensation is a disincentive for the attraction and retention of teaching talent, especially in hard to staff schools.

Teachers need to embrace standards and testing. Standards act as a roadmap that guides instruction, and regular testing helps teachers discern whether students are learning. They help guide instruction and they take minimal time away from teaching. Teaching "to the test" means that students can read and answer questions about what they have read. It means they can solve grade-level math problems. It means they can write an essay and prove an understanding of basic science concepts. Teaching to the test is teaching to the standards. Testing provides students a chance to prove what they have learned and teachers an opportunity to prove what they have taught.

The problem is that in most classrooms, teachers face large groups of students with a wide range of abilities and challenges. With the advent of social promotion and mainstreaming of special education students, you might find an ability differential of five years or more in a given classroom, as well as students with learning disabilities, gifted children, and those who are striving to master English. Standards and testing are here to stay. Teachers need to demand that districts provide them with tools to achieve success.

Teachers need classroom support. Given the challenges outlined above, teachers need differentiation strategies and instructional support. With an aide in my classroom, I am able to group students by ability and offer support or challenge to those who need it. This assistance is invaluable to my program, and I could never achieve the results that I do without it.

Teachers need to demand the right to exercise creative freedom. If we are open to accountability measures, administrators ought to allow us the freedom to teach in such a way that is most effective, given our unique gifts and the makeup of our classes. If our students are learning, as evidenced by standardized testing, we should have the right to design our own lessons and strategies.

Teachers need to admit that not every teacher is satisfactory. Administrators need to exercise their right to dismiss ineffective individuals, because allowing them to remain in their positions hurts children and it adversely affects the perception of the teaching profession as a whole. It has also given rise to the popularity of charter schools, as they have the ability to choose their teachers and hold them accountable, whereas in non-charter public schools, teachers are rarely dismissed because the process is too difficult and costly. North Carolina teacher, Bill Ferriter writes, “Teachers rarely

question the professional judgment of other teachers and take great offense when someone questions them. As a result, the best interest of kids is often overlooked. How's that for scary?" (Ferriter, 2009) Scary, but true.

Teachers need to train our hungry eyes on people and programs that are realizing success. They are out there. Look at Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone, where charter schools and a caring community have infused an inner city neighborhood with hope, middle class values and academic success. (Brooks, 2009) And the Bronx Academy of Letters, where Joan Sullivan and a group of committed teachers are inspiring young creative talent and 98% of students pass the English and math regents exams. (Schultheiss, 2004 and Urban Assembly website) And what about Phil Holmes at the View Park Preparatory High School (Landsberg, 2008) and Mikara Solomon- Davis in Compton? (Ross, 2008) They transformed classroom and school culture in inner-city neighborhoods so students were achieving on a par with nearby elite campuses. And there's Bill Ferriter, a self-described "accomplished teacher" from North Carolina, who found that knowledge of state standards and participation in a professional learning community transformed his teaching and the achievement of his students. (Ferriter, 2009)

Everyone wants public schools to succeed. But not everyone knows what teachers need to succeed. Too often what they hear offers not hope, but further disillusionment. They hear that charter schools are working, yet teachers fight them. (Keller, 2009) They hear that periodic assessment can track student achievement and drive effective instruction, yet teachers boycott them. (L.A. Times, 2009) They want accountability in order to determine what works and what does not, yet teachers fight

against standardized testing. They hear that teachers are underpaid, but refuse to be evaluated on the basis of student achievement and teaching ability. They are desperate to find a way to improve inner city schools, but hear that the teachers' union is fighting to keep Teach for America's young, enthusiastic teachers out. (Vaznis, 2009)

Instead of continuing to fight the steamroller of reform, teachers need to say, "Yes we can." And then ask for what we need with a collective, professional voice. The voice of expertise and experience. When we embrace transparency and accountability, we will earn the respect of the educational community. When we begin to speak to the issue of every student's right to learn, we will have earned the right to have our voices heard and our ideas considered. When our voices speak for kids louder than they speak for adults, we will become part of the solution and inadvertently elevate our profession as well. Try it. "Yes we can...and here's what we need to do it." "Yes we can." "Yes we can."

To be continued....

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