

Republicans, Democrats and the Teachers' Unions

By Marc Tucker on September 15, 2016 6:15 AM

This is the third and last in a series of blogs about the orthodoxies of Republican and Democratic education policy over the last 40 years and the need for a new paradigm for national education politics. In the [first blog in the series](#), I traced the step-by-step commitment of the Republicans to market models of education reform and the reduction of the role of government in American life and showed how these two dynamics are leading some Republicans to give up on public schools altogether. In the second, I showed how, during the same period, [Democrats committed themselves](#) to a form of identity politics that ended up doling out money in categorical programs, accomplished little in recent years and, in the process, left out poor whites, thus helping to create today's politics. In this blog, I focus on the role that teachers unions have played in the politics of education reform and use the conflict over teachers and their unions to make the case for a new politics of school reform, based on the need to professionalize teaching.

As many Republicans see it, teachers' unions are among the greatest obstacles to the improvement of student performance. They see the unions as protecting bad—even the worst—teachers from being fired and as doubling down on contract provisions that call for getting rid of young, enthusiastic and effective teachers first and protecting older, time-serving teachers to the last. As they see it, the claim that teachers are the voice of students, especially of disadvantaged students, is a cruel joke. They see teachers' unions as interested only in protecting teachers' economic interests, not the interests of students and parents. And, finally, they see teachers and their unions reflexively supporting Democrats no matter what the Republicans do.

For Republicans, it is obvious that the public ought to be paying market rates for teachers of different subjects—math and science teachers more than teachers of English and social studies—because people with a good command of math and science are in such short supply and the need for them in many parts of the country is nothing short of desperate, but they see teachers and their unions insisting that all teachers must be paid equally. Most importantly, Republicans are deeply frustrated at their inability to create systems in which teacher compensation is related in some way to teachers' demonstrated competence. Where else, they want to know, are all professionals compensated without regard to expertise and accomplishment? What is the point of working really hard to improve your skills, if it makes no difference in your career prospects or compensation?

Most teachers and their Democratic supporters have, of course, a very different view. Prior to the 1970s, teachers' unions were almost non-existent. The NEA stopped being an umbrella association for many education professionals in that period and the AFT grew in power because teachers' salaries were going down as the salaries of high status professionals were going up. Organizing was the only route available to them to fight back against an eroding standard of living. Under American labor law, unlike European labor law, management and labor were supposed to behave like natural enemies. School boards hired labor attorneys to represent them whose experience was in private enterprise. The boards quickly agreed to contracts specifying last-in, first-out rules when budgets forced layoffs. When money was tight, the boards' attorneys suggested that the boards offer concessions on "working conditions" in lieu of pay raises. In a public school environment, these concessions amounted to giving teachers and their unions key roles in determining who got which jobs in the systems, steadily eroding the authority of central office staff and principals. School boards were generally most afraid of public reactions to strikes, so they were more than ready to give away the store on these management issues, especially when money was tight.

Then times changed. The public got increasingly concerned about student performance and discovered that the school boards and management could not set up compensation schemes that would enable them to provide higher pay to teachers in short supply, to compensate especially able teachers. When the Great Recession hit, they discovered that the last-in, first-out provisions in teachers contracts prevented them from doing what they thought was in the best interests of students. And so on.

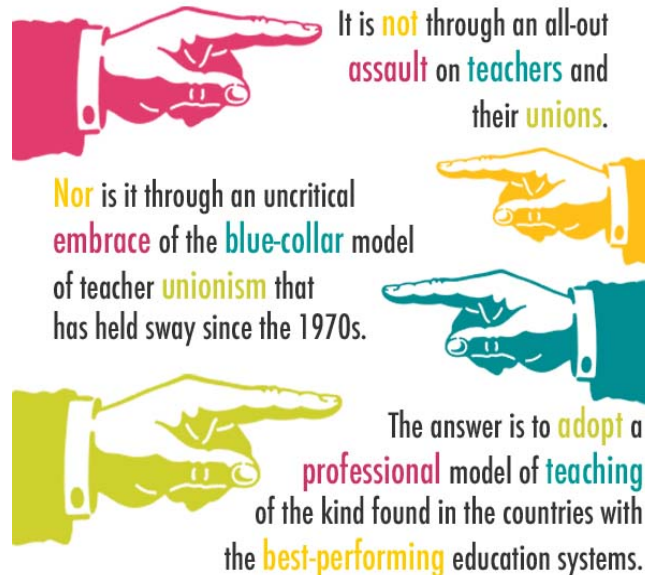
Politicians and the public blamed the teachers, forgetting that it was the school boards that had offered these provisions in lieu of pay raises. The teachers, under assault from every quarter, were not about to give up what was left of what they won earlier. They were opposed to "merit pay" because, in their experience, when principals were allowed to pay some teachers more than others, most principals' decisions were based not on teachers' competence, but on the loyalty of individuals to the principal. They were not about to embrace the idea that teachers in short supply should be paid more than others because they thought that all teachers were underpaid. They were not about to change the last-in, first-out rule because their experience was that school districts would seize any opportunity they could to hire two cheap teachers in the place of one experienced, more expensive teacher.

Most important, teachers and their unions felt as though they were in a bunker, blamed by everyone for faltering student performance, when the proportion of students in poverty in their schools had reached unprecedented proportions. They were being held to account for society's failure to meet its most basic responsibilities. And, finally, the regime of tough, test-based accountability, introduced by the younger Bush and embraced by the Obama administration, had been experienced by teachers and their unions as a mean-spirited policy that was, at its core,

embraced by the Obama administration, had been experienced by teachers and their unions as a mean-spirited policy that was, at its core, anti-teacher and thoroughly demeaning.

The result was **teacher exodus**, plummeting **enrollments in schools of education** and rapidly **expanding teacher shortages** that are now leading to the widespread waiver of even the already low standards for becoming a school teacher in a growing number of states. Astoundingly, these developments, instead of producing increased compensation for teachers in a country in which teachers' salaries are already **low by global standards**, has instead led to steadily declining teachers' compensation and an increasing gap between teachers' compensation and compensation in the high status professions.

There is a way out of this mess.



The one place where Democrats and Republicans have agreed on teacher policy has been on tough, test-based teacher accountability and that has been an unmitigated disaster, as I just said. There is a way out of this mess. It is not through an all-out assault on teachers and their unions. Nor is it through an uncritical embrace of the blue-collar model of teacher unionism that has held sway since the 1970s. The answer is to adopt a professional model of teaching of the kind found in the countries with the best-performing education systems, many of which have very strong teachers' unions. That implies that, in the United States, government will have to abandon its attack on the unions and the unions will have to get out of their bunker and embrace a very different model of unionism.

All of the top-performing education systems have been built around the imperatives of teacher quality: attracting high-performing high school graduates to teaching with competitive compensation and professional conditions of work. They recruit their teachers from the top half, not the bottom half, of their college-going high school grads. They send them to research universities to be educated and shut down their diploma mills. They create real career ladders for teachers, with starting compensation competitive with compensation for top civil servants and culminating in pay for master teachers at the same level as school principals. Compensation is tied to advancement up the ladder, not to longevity and the taking of "graduate" courses unrelated to teaching duties. Teachers advance up the ladder based on demonstrated teaching expertise, leadership ability and the ability to coach and mentor new and junior teachers. Teachers in systems like this stay in teaching three to four times as long as the typical American teachers and therefore develop much more expertise. Teachers near the top of the ladder are expected to take a strong role in leading teams of teachers who play the decisive role in improving the curriculum, student lessons, instructional methods and student assessment. What I am describing is a truly professional environment for teaching. And it works.

Teachers in such systems have the pay, authority, responsibility and status that most American teachers only dream about. But, if they are going to get that, their unions will have to largely abandon the blue-collar model of unionism they were forced into in the 1970s and have lived with ever since. At the heart of this new professional model is the kind of career ladder I just described. When I asked Lily Eskelsen Garcia, the head of the NEA, in public whether she could support such a model, I got **an emphatic "Yes!"** When I asked Randi Weingarten in another public forum recently whether she could embrace the larger group of reforms of which this kind of career ladder is a part, **she gave me the same response**. This does not mean that all the state affiliates of NEA or all the AFT locals would instantly climb on board if offered such a deal. There are scars all over the place on both sides that need healing. But the makings of a deal to turn teaching into the one of the most desired professions in the United States are there if only the Democrats and Republicans who are part of the current impasse are willing to build on them.

Categories: [teacher unions](#)

Tags: [Democrats](#) [politics](#) [Republicans](#) [teachers unions](#)