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COMMENTARY

Teachers as Political Actors

By Kevin Meuwissen

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When I ask beginning teachers, "What kinds of political actors do you think teachers ought to be, and why?" many shift uncomfortably in their seats, loath to imagine that engaging in political behavior is an upshot of their chosen profession. But, of course, teachers act politically all the time, collaterally and overtly, on large and small scales.

Broadly speaking, teaching is a controversial profession. Bandied about are the mythical contentions that teacher quality is the fundamental factor of academic success, and that because some schools in the United States are producing fewer and fewer so-called college- and career-ready graduates than others, their teachers must be failing.

On a large scale, the politics of teaching is demonstrated in **Indiana** and **Michigan**, where recent legislation barred unions from collecting mandatory fees for negotiating teachers' contracts; in North Carolina, where Gov. Pat McCrory and the state legislature **eliminated K-12 teacher tenure**; in Tennessee, where the state board of education voted to begin revoking teachers' licenses based on standardized-test-score data; and in New York, where the federally funded Race to the Top program flooded the state's education system with a half-dozen reform initiatives, all at once. By simply joining the profession, teachers—and their work—are immersed in this kind of politics.

Teachers also engage in intentional political activity in their communities and schools, sometimes via blogs or advocacy initiatives that challenge the wisdom of high-stakes testing. Yet research by Diana Hess, a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, suggests that many educators try to keep politics out of their teaching to avoid accusations of bias or even to head off litigation, and to provide students with space to explore different political positions and make up their own minds about them.

Those efforts often prove paradoxical. One reason is that education is a public good. Thus, it makes sense that educators would support efforts to

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strengthen that good—by lobbying to fund programs that bolster students' chances of academic success, for example, or publicizing the negative consequences of using high-stakes test scores to evaluate teachers. Of course, such activities typically involve taking partisan stances on public policies in full view of the school community.

Another reason is that teachers are in a prime position to introduce, model, scaffold, and discuss political action with their students. By refusing to talk about politics in the classroom or hiding their own positions and practices, teachers forgo opportunities to help students understand the nature and consequences of political activity, regardless of their teachers' personal political stances.

A more subtle kind of professional politics consists of what Stephen Thornton of the University of South Florida calls gatekeeping. Every day, teachers make decisions about what educational ends have value and ought to be pursued, what resources to allocate toward those ends, and why.

Inevitably, teachers are political actors, even those who try not to be. When educators acquiesce and "simply" teach kids the subject matter, they choose to be a certain kind of political actor—one, I suspect, that policymakers greatly appreciate as they hastily launch untested and unwarranted practices into the educational milieu.

I am not so naive as to suggest that political action is risk-free, particularly for beginning teachers, and in schools facing scrutiny and sanctions for low test scores and graduation rates. Consequently, it behooves those who train new teachers to consider what kinds of political actors their students could be and how to help them toward those ends. Some suggestions for doing this include:

Helping beginning teachers connect educational purposes to political activity. Teacher-educators can support prospective teachers' gatekeeping practices by asking them to connect their instructional decisions to the purposes that ground them. They also can show how education activists draw from particular aims when deciding what political issues and strategies to pursue. In the wake of teachers' **refusal to administer districtwide standardized tests** at Seattle's Garfield High School in the fall of 2012, for example, district Superintendent Jose Banda formed a task force to review the tests and propose alternatives. However, many educators believed that Mr. Banda's decision to invite only five teachers to serve on a task force of 30 limited their impact. Consequently, several teachers across the district formed a working group, crafting and publicizing recommendations based on research related to assessment.

Helping beginning teachers understand the importance of political networking. By political

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networking, I mean two things: first, building local alliances that help beginning teachers unpack the political subtexts of their schools and, second, joining larger groups that share their educational goals, face common barriers, and contribute resources to address those barriers. On the first point, critically observing one's school or district circumstances and asking good questions of the right people—practices that teacher-educators can reinforce—are important elements of political networking. On the second, teacher-educators can connect novices to professional-development opportunities and advocacy groups with common aims.

Helping beginning teachers consider the conceivable consequences of different kinds of political action. As a colleague in Texas reminded me recently, strategic gatekeeping in one context might be viewed as gross insubordination in another. Teachers must choose among approaches to political action. In one circumstance, teachers and administrators might reach consensus around a goal—say, performance of a certain percentage of students at the mastery level on a New York state regents' exam—with teachers successfully lobbying for the freedom to choose different means of achieving that goal. In a harsher climate, teachers might exercise what researcher Catherine Cornbleth of the State University of New York's University at Buffalo calls strategic compliance—that is, publicly playing along with restrictive school norms while quietly cultivating alternative courses of action with allies.

As recent graduates of our teacher education programs start their careers, I urge them to take several steps toward productive political activity:

First, find mentors to help them understand and work within their institutions' political currents and undercurrents. Second, listen intently, and ask powerful, pragmatic questions about the effects of policy on their teaching. Third, participate in education policy and practice conversations on national, state, and local levels, and pay attention to the common threads among them. Fourth, publicize and discuss their teaching experiences at open houses, school board meetings, and other community outlets so their communities better understand the implications of policy for learning and teaching.

Finally, new teachers should be purposeful, strategic classroom gatekeepers who ensure that their students are protected from the political stressors that teachers and administrators contend with, and can focus instead on learning to read, write, talk to one another, and appreciate the intellectual power of their subject matter, in the classroom and beyond it.

Kevin Meuwissen directs the social studies teacher education program at the University of Rochester's Warner School of Education, in Rochester, N.Y.

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