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What It Means to 'Believe in Teachers'

By Kim Farris-Berg

Last month, in his much-lauded **speech to the Republican National Convention**, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie made "we believe in teachers" one of his central themes. This prompts the questions: What does it mean to believe in teachers? And, do we?

In the frenetic hunt for ways to fix K-12 public schools, the solution that policymakers and many other education leaders currently embrace is to tell teachers what to do and how to do it.

Those in power, irrespective of their political affiliations, are standardizing curricula, tightening licensure requirements, offering merit pay, and tying teacher evaluations to student performance. Governors across the nation, and most recently Rahm Emanuel, the Democratic mayor of Chicago and President Barack Obama's former chief of staff, are taking aim at the rules established by teachers' unions—policies governing teachers' tenure, pay, role differentiation (what they will and will not do), and work hours.

All of these efforts at improvement are things done to teachers. They are attempts to control teachers' behavior, choices, and quality from the outside. The motto seems to be: To get accountability, we need to get tough.

This approach, on its face, doesn't believe in teachers. Instead, it doubts teachers have the professional capacity to improve our schools themselves. It presumes that union rules have emerged from teachers' self-interest and not from the way our policies are designed. It assumes teachers are the problem.

But what if teachers are the answer? What if trusting teachers, and not controlling them, is the key to school success? My colleagues and I recently wrote a book examining this question. We concluded that if we want high-performing schools, then trusting teachers is a promising strategy to pursue.

We identified and examined schools in which teachers have autonomy to collectively, with their colleagues

at their schools, make the decisions influencing whole-school success. Teachers—those who are closest to the students—determine not just what happens in their classrooms, but the school's entire approach to learning. Some even make such decisions as how to allocate the school budget, whom to hire, and whether to offer tenure.

Currently, around 50 public schools are governed by **groups of teachers**. These groups are increasingly known as teacher partnerships. Some teacher partnerships manage district schools; some manage charter schools. Some are union-affiliated; others are not. Teacher partnerships have secured autonomy in urban, rural, and suburban settings, serving students from preschool to age 21.

It turns out that teacher partnerships develop the kinds of schools that many of us profess to want. They individualize learning. They put their students in the position to be active (not passive) learners who gain academic and life skills. Teacher partnerships create school cultures that are the same as those in high-performing organizations. That is, they innovate, collaborate, accept accountability, function as learners, and make efficient use of resources, among other things.

Gov. Christie, Mayor Emanuel, and their colleagues might appreciate that teacher partnerships also resolve many of today's hot-button education issues themselves—no need for politicians to take on heated battles and for states, cities, and districts to take on so much management. Teacher partnerships that have authority to allocate their entire school budgets, for example, carefully weigh salary and wage expenditures against other spending opportunities.

In a position to call the shots, teachers have come to understand that raising salaries requires cuts in other areas of their school budgets—especially when revenues are not increasing. No teacher partnership with full budget autonomy has elected to guarantee annual salary adjustments for cost of living or years of experience. None guarantees automatic adjustments to teachers who complete continuing education.

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In the same vein, some teacher partnerships, in both charter and district settings, have decided that all teachers in their schools will have just one-year, at-will contracts for work. Responsible and accountable for school success, these teachers want colleagues to continuously put forth their best effort, and they want a means of removing colleagues who do not. They also know they must reserve the right to lay off even their well-performing colleagues when the budget is tight.

Some teacher partnerships negotiate waivers from their own union rules so they can increase educators' working hours and expand their roles. They also obtain waivers to do more (not less) teacher evaluation and to require (not avoid) coaching and mentoring in the name of improvement.

Union leaders have agreed to sign these waivers because teacher partnerships have control over professional issues—something unions have sought for their members for decades. In schools run by teacher partnerships, teachers' employers don't make the decisions; teachers do. So, union leaders don't see as much need to represent these teachers' professional interests to their employers, and these same leaders can shift their role to supporting these teachers with the work the teachers do in their partnerships.

Over and over, teachers working in partnerships said all of their decisionmaking, including around school design and teacher job structures, stems from their real responsibility and accountability for whole-school

success. Those granting teachers autonomy (state leaders, district leaders, and charter school authorizers) hold teachers accountable for meeting clear, mutually agreed-upon objectives. But the teachers decide how to meet those objectives. And in the position to call the shots, teachers are willing to accept accountability for outcomes.

This is a far cry from the results of the "get tough" approach, which increasingly asks teachers to accept accountability for the outcomes of decisions that they do not, and cannot, make. The idea of giving teachers professional authority to run schools is an idea that builds bridges instead of anger and resistance. It is an idea that puts teachers in a position to focus on students, and not on poor job culture or what outsiders have gotten wrong about school improvement.

Are teacher-partnership arrangements meant for all teachers? No. Teacher autonomy is meant to be a parallel strategy for improvement. Others are welcome to continue working at the same time toward improvement in conventional schools and conventional working arrangements for teachers.

Are teacher partnerships foolproof? Again, no. There will be mistakes, and even flops. As more and more teachers embrace autonomy, they and others will need to seize opportunities to improve their craft. Policymakers and education leaders will need to work with teacher partnerships to identify and remove barriers to creating high-performing cultures. Union leaders could choose to evolve union roles. Teacher training institutions could support teachers' migration to managing whole schools with autonomy and accountability.

These ideas are just a start. Teacher autonomy will evolve. Much more work will need to be done.

But perhaps the most important work is already taking place. Those who are pioneering teacher partnerships are confirming what many have suspected is true: To believe in teachers means to trust them. Not just with the care of our children. Not just in their classrooms. And not just with implementing what others decide. Believing in teachers means we are willing to consider that telling them what to do, and how to do it, might be the wrong policy and management prescription for increasing accountability and improving K-12.

Truly believing in teachers is to trust them with full and professional authority to call the shots, for whole-school success.

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