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Dispelling Myths about Teacher "Tenure" ***Education Historian Diane Ravitch on Teachers' Unions***

Since February 2007, two leading figures in education, Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch, have been debating public education-its strengths, weaknesses, improvement strategies, and more-in a blog called Bridging Differences. (A complete archive is available by clicking here) The following is excerpted with permission from Diane Ravitch's post on February 3, 2009.

RECENTLY, AN OLD FRIEND who is a businessman and philanthropist sent me a copy of a speech that he gave at Channel 13's Celebration of Teaching and Learning. For many years, he and his family have very generously supported a school for gifted children in one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods. The main conclusion of his speech was that the obstacle to educating all children well is the union, because the principal cannot hire and fire and assign teachers as he or she wants. He asked me what I thought of his ideas.

I responded that I was puzzled. The unions don't seem to cause low performance in the wealthy suburban districts that surround our city. They don't seem to be a problem for the nations that regularly register high scores on international tests. If getting rid of the unions were the solution to the problem of low performance, then why, I asked him, do the southern states-where unions are weak or nonexistent-continue to perform worse than states with strong unions? And how can we explain the strong union presence in Massachusetts, which is the nation's highest performing state on the National Assessment of Educational Progress? I suggested that low performance must be caused by something else other than teachers' unions. I have not yet received a reply, so I suppose he is thinking about it.

It actually doesn't seem to be all that hard to get rid of incompetent teachers. It appears that 40 percent of all those who enter teaching are gone within five years, according to research that I have seen. In every district, to my knowledge, teachers do not gain due process rights for three years (in some places, it takes five). During those three to five years, their supervisors have plenty of time and opportunity to evaluate them and tell them to leave teaching.

Then, when they have passed the three- or five-year mark, they have due process rights. They cannot be terminated without cause and due process. Although that is usually referred to as tenure, it really is not tenure. In higher education, tenure is an iron-clad guarantee of lifetime employment except for very egregious causes. Teachers do not have that. They have the right to due process. Many administrators would like to fire teachers without due process. I can't blame teachers for wanting protection from arbitrary administrators, especially now, when there are quite a few high-profile superintendents who like to grab headlines by threatening to fire teachers.

The right to form and join a union is one of the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 23). I made several trips to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the end of the Cold War and met many teachers who were eager to belong to a union that would protect their interests. The state did not want unions or tolerated only faux-unions.

I read recently that membership in unions is now under 10 percent of the private-sector workforce. Former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich wrote in the Los Angeles Times not long ago that the unions helped our nation build a solid middle class. Now, in these difficult times, we may again see a turn to unionism, and for all the predictable reasons, having to do with protection from arbitrary and capricious management to economic security to the demand to have a voice in decisions about the workplace.

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