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Teachers Get Little Say in a Book About Them

By **MICHAEL WINERIP**

Can an education reform movement that demeans and trivializes teachers succeed? It's hard to imagine, but that is what is going on in parts of America today.

In [Steven Brill's](#) new book celebrating the movement, "Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools," teachers are literally the least of it. Of the three million who work in traditional public schools, three are interviewed by Mr. Brill on the record; their insights take up six of the book's 437 pages.

Nor do [charter school](#) teachers fare much better. At Harlem Success Academy 1, which produces top scores on state tests, Mr. Brill describes how teachers working around the clock continually burn out. Like kitchen appliances, they last a few years and then need to be replaced. One teacher describes being "overwhelmed, underappreciated and underpaid" and tells Mr. Brill, "There is no way I can do this beyond another year or two."

Mr. Brill has little positive to say about teachers. Veterans "hanging on for 20 or 30 years caring only about their pensions and tenure protection are toxic." While he admits that there are thousands of teachers who are skilled and highly motivated, "increasingly" there are those who put in an "8:15 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. workday with a civil-service mentality." (How Mr. Brill could possibly know whether the number of these teachers is increasing is unclear, since he provides no statistics or attribution.)

Until this project, Mr. Brill, 61, had rarely written about education. Nor was he well acquainted with public schools — he graduated from Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts and sent his three children to private schools.

The book grew from his *New Yorker* article two years ago about rubber rooms, where the city's most dysfunctional teachers spent idle days, collecting salaries while waiting months

or years for their cases to be resolved. “I see a guy asleep with his head on a desk and alarm clock,” Mr. Brill recalled in an interview. “I see another guy, if he were in a room with my daughter, I’d call the police.”

There were 744 teachers in rubber rooms at the time. For some, that is understandable in a system of 77,000 teachers; to Mr. Brill, it was a prime example of a union more interested in protecting its members than in educating children.

Mr. Brill, a writer (“Teamsters,” 1978), lawyer (Yale ’75) and entrepreneur (founder of Court TV and the American Lawyer publication), knows that every story needs a villain or an evil force. In “Class Warfare,” the problem is not the poverty the children experience, the violence they see in their homes and neighborhoods or the lack of vocabulary that the sons and daughters of adults who did not finish high school often take with them to kindergarten.

The villains of Mr. Brill’s story are bad teachers coddled by unions.

With his legal training and business background, Mr. Brill is expert at chronicling the union’s failings. He documents the growth of the New York City teachers’ contract from 39 pages in 1962 to 200 today, along with work rules that can be used at every turn to obstruct principals from improving schools. He details the case of a Stuyvesant High School teacher who was so drunk that she passed out at her desk, only to have the union claim on its Web site that she was disciplined as part of a scheme to harm senior teachers.

He goes a lot easier on the reformers who have spent recent years pushing the expansion of charter schools and standardized tests. Mr. Brill identifies the millionaires and billionaires who attack the unions and steered the Democratic Party to their cause. There is Whitney Tilson, who parlayed \$1 million of his parents’, relatives’ and own money to build a hedge fund that he told Mr. Brill was worth \$50 million; Ravenel Boykin Curry IV, who works for the family’s money fund and has homes in Manhattan, East Hampton and the Dominican Republic; and David Einhorn, who at age 38 “was already one of Wall Street’s successful short sellers.”

The book is called “Class Warfare.” I expected Mr. Brill to explore why these men single out the union for blame when children fail. If a substantial part of the problem was poverty and not bad teachers, the question would be why people like them are allowed to make so much when others have so little. I hear this all the time from teachers, but when I asked Mr. Brill,

he said, “I didn’t see it as the rich versus the union guys, although now that you say it, I can see how you could draw that line.”

Harlem Success 1 shares a building with a traditional public school, P.S. 149. Mr. Brill presents numbers that show the charter school is far superior: 86 percent of Harlem Success students were proficient in English in 2010, compared with 29 percent of P.S. 149’s. He notes that charters are criticized for having fewer children with learning challenges, but “none of the actual data supports this.”

Actually, it does. According to the city, in 2010 P.S. 149 had more children poor enough to receive free lunch (76 percent vs. 67 percent for the charter); more children for whom English was a second language (13 percent vs. 1.5 for the charter); and more children with disabilities (22 percent vs. 16).

And that is what so scares those of us who see traditional public schools as vital to democracy: that they will become repositories for the poorest, most troubled children.

Reviewers have criticized Mr. Brill for making what seems like a bizarre turnaround in the book’s final chapter. When I asked him about it, he said the two years spent reporting had changed him.

In the book’s first 420 pages, he bashes the union and its president, [Randi Weingarten](#), is dismissive of veteran teachers and extols charters.

Three people seem to have altered that thinking. First, David Levin, a founder of the Knowledge Is Power Program, the biggest charter chain in the country, told him that charter schools would never be able to train near the number of quality teachers needed to populate all public schools.

Second, Jessica Reid, an assistant principal at Harlem Success who worked night and day to improve the lives of poor children, burned out right before Mr. Brill’s eyes and quit midyear.

And third, against the odds, he came to like Ms. Weingarten. “She really cares about this stuff,” he told me.

The book ultimately concludes that only the union can supply quality veteran teachers on the scale needed.

At a time when education is so polarized, Mr. Brill seems to have found some middle ground. He even suggested to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg that he make Ms. Weingarten New York's next chancellor to provide the balance necessary for real change.

On Page 426, the mayor responds. "It's a really stupid idea," Mr. Bloomberg said. "Never in a million years."

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