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'Shut up and teach': The high stakes of teacher voice

Posted By [Eric Shieh](#) On January 27, 2012 @ 10:19 am In [High School, Leadership, Opinion, Policy & Reform, Pre-K to 8, Stages, Standards & Accountability, Teaching, Topics](#) | [14 Comments](#)

[1]I remember the moment I stopped resenting the deduction in my paychecks that went to my union. It took me three years, and happened suddenly.

Halfway through my third year of teaching music, in 2007, administrators in my St. Louis district decided to cut student time in the arts by 64 percent at the middle-school level as part of a plan to improve student test-scores. Appalled, I sent an email to my fellow arts teachers across the district asking what we were going to do.

The response from my colleagues? *There is nothing you can do; this has been happening for the past 20 years.* Nonetheless, unwilling to let the arts programs go quietly, I circulated petitions among staff, acquiring signatures from several hundred teachers—arts and non-arts teachers alike. It didn't do anything.

Out of ideas, and with no sense of what it might accomplish, I called my union. The response was immediate: The union would help mobilize teachers and parents opposed to the planned cuts.

In the end, the union's role in the struggle was minimal. But at that moment when I felt ready to give up, its contribution was decisive: It rejected the powerlessness that my colleagues had articulated, and affirmed my professional convictions about the centrality of the arts in public education. With renewed confidence, several of my colleagues and I began to organize, and following a large outcry from parents and teachers, the administration ultimately reversed its decision.



[2]

Eric Shieh

Flash forward to today. I am in my sixth year of teaching, now in New York City, and what bothered me then in St. Louis bothers me even more now. I am frightened by a perceived powerlessness in my profession—teachers across the nation who have given up advocating for their students not because they don't wish to, but because it seems an impossibility. And I am saddened by the fragility of our hard-forged convictions. I am saddened that my efforts researching and negotiating the work of public education seem meaningless in the face of current policy debates—and that last year's nationwide struggle over teacher tenure or [this week's "debates" over teacher evaluation in New York](#) [3] arrive forcefully, demanding immediate reaction rather than initiative from educators.

Consider this past year. By all accounts, it should have been one of teacher outrage. For me, 2011 started—as it did in many school districts across the country—with the announcement of teacher

layoffs for the fourth year in a row. In New York City, this included 6,000 teachers, with a disproportionate share of those in physical education and the arts. Over the summer, my school also joined many others across the country in losing its Title I funding when a large portion of these funds expired with the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act](#) ^[4]. And then in October, \$753 million in cuts to New York City schools forced mass layoffs of school support workers: secretaries, teacher aides and parent coordinators.

Additionally, my school's budget was reduced by 3.26 percent (adding to a total of almost 14 percent in the past four years), general per-pupil funding was cut by 6 percent, and the city decided students with special needs would receive 15 percent less per-pupil funding than before. Students in poverty would receive 50 percent less.

In total, this meant a budget reduction of more than \$300,000 for my small school, 80 percent of whose students live at or near the poverty line.

What interests me here, however, is not the magnitude of the cuts and layoffs, both at my school and across the nation. I could list the effects on my school, where we made hard choices to reduce after-school programs and time for teacher collaboration in an effort to maintain moderate class sizes and services to students with disabilities.

Instead, what interests me is the fact that these cuts—coupled with other challenges that teachers faced in 2011—targeted students in poverty and students with special needs, that they targeted arts and physical-education programs, and that they severely disrupted school processes as one seismic change after another was proposed. What interests me, too, is how the cuts to schools came and went so quietly while other education issues raged in the public eye.

How do cuts so brazenly disproportionate toward students in poverty and those receiving special-education services happen without notice?

I believe these cuts were made—strategically, perversely—to the very populations least likely to detect and fight against them. I have seen this happen all too often in the short decade I have worked in education.

Who, then, will speak up—and not simply for marginalized students and communities, but for all students? Who will articulate what it means to attend music class, or what it means to be in a class with 28 students versus 35 or 40 students? Who might feel that these issues are no less worthy of attention than that pertain to teacher tenure or evaluation?

Most teachers, it seems, have learned simply to “shut up and teach” ([as one conservative blogger has advocated](#) ^[5]). The atmosphere has been so relentlessly damning and thoughtless about our work these past few years, it's hard to know where to start engaging with the public. By my best estimate, under 10 percent of New York City's teachers participated in any kind of protest or public action over last year's threatened teacher layoffs. The budget cuts, as I have noted, came and went quietly.

What happened?

Perhaps teachers heard what I had been hearing as I sought to organize: “This has been happening for the past four years,” or “There is nothing you can do.” Perhaps teachers learned the lesson that Gov. Scott Walker hoped we'd learn from the Wisconsin protests: *It doesn't matter how loudly you shout*. The power to direct education lies with politicians who consider it one of many special interests, with billionaire philanthropists who've been plowing policy changes that suit their business models through Congress for nearly a decade.

Mark me: I do not believe that teachers alone should run schools or direct education policy, nor do I believe that every idea from the business sector is misguided. But there are deep problems when teachers are taught to shut up and “teach,” as if they could do so in silence. When teachers cease to advocate, we cease to fulfill one of the most essential elements of teaching: the act of caring.

To teach is to care—and to care deeply when students don't get the services they require, or when class sizes are unwieldy, or when test prep becomes synonymous with education, or when there's not enough money to pay for after-school programs.

There is a grave negligence, I believe, when the public gives the work of education over to bureaucratic and market forces. More than politicians and the invisible hand of markets, it is teachers working as professionals who recognize that students are not numbers to be thrown into global economic wars, but rather lives and bodies—bodies that sit in desks, that suffer, that grieve, that matter uniquely in the future we wish to create. It is, indeed, the charge of the teaching profession to further the work of education, in consideration of our children, our society's needs, our changing world.

Lest I be accused of naïveté, let me point out that part of teacher professionalism is advocacy about job interests—compensation, money for supplies, pleasant working environments. It is also true that the perspectives of teachers may be biased toward the immediate needs of their students, and less concerned with larger social and economic needs. But this is no less true in the bureaucracy (politicians look out for votes) or market (investors look out for profits): These are all compromised spaces, which must have shared voice and dialogue to serve as checks and balances, and to build on the best that each offers.

A few examples of reforms suggested by professional associations of teachers seem called for here—examples that in the past decade have been overshadowed by talk of testing, accountability and choice. [ASCD](#) ^[6], a national association of education leaders focused on curriculum practices and policies, launched an initiative in 2007 called "[Whole Child](#) ^[7]," which calls for states to coordinate services, resources and data collection across school, social, health and safety sectors. Urging broader definitions of achievement and accountability, it proposes a plan that measures achievement by including access to healthcare, safety, personalized learning and support, learning that is connected to the broader community, and academic challenge across all subjects.

In 2008, a coalition from various education researchers and diverse professional associations launched a campaign for "[A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education](#) ^[8]." In it, the authors coupled a bevy of school-improvement proposals with investment in pre-k and kindergarten, health services, and access to a range of out-of-school programs. The policy paper is notable for its repeated emphasis on evidence based in serious and sustained research.

What happens when these kinds of proposals that grow out of education communities are lost or rendered mute? What happens when the discipline of education is devalued? Or when teachers come to learn that no one will listen to their testimonies, assessments and analyses of what they daily see and hear?

If you ask me what needs to happen, I have a few suggestions. First, unions need to widen their discourse beyond bread-and-butter issues like compensation and work environment. Teachers must be able to engage seriously and continuously in their profession's discussions of evaluating teacher quality, of developing standards and curriculum, of allocating resources. Only then will we see substantive engagement, and not the kinds of rushed reactions I've seen recently from New York City teachers over the current teacher-evaluation debates.

Second, in order to do this, leaders of all teacher professional associations must do a better job of organizing teacher voice. Here there is fault in our unions and our professional associations, which for too long have served as top-heavy lobbying organizations. Small, local associations such as the [New York Collective of Radical Educators](#) ^[9] have found ways to foster and direct teacher voice by creating member-led committees that develop projects and actions; a few national organizations have done similar work with membership networks. It is imperative that our unions and largest associations find ways to build spaces for member action, and to focus member discourse on innovative practices and policy.

Third and finally, teachers need to find ways to engage with education policy. This engagement—

which the act of caring for our students demands of us—includes finding and creating spaces within our professional associations where we can speak of issues that matter to us, and where we can act in ways amplified by the weight and work of the associations.

These are not easy tasks, and I do not have a precise blueprint for where to start. But my experience working in several cities and participating in teacher associations has convinced me that there's an eagerness among teachers to participate in our profession as professionals, not as technicians isolated in classrooms and subject areas. To build that capacity after years and perhaps decades of isolation, though, will require careful attention and hard work.

The stakes—the voices of those who work with children daily, the building of educators' capacities to care fully and advocate for those they teach, the valuing of teaching as a profession—have rarely been higher. But I believe they are the right stakes, and the ones on which not only our educational but also our civic lives will thrive.

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