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# EXPECTING MORE FROM TEACHING AND TEACHERS

&gt;By Ann Rosen Spector, Ph.D.

Teacher unions should be on the front lines with every citizen demanding true educational reforms. The focus should not be to save jobs, but students, to raise standards, not just salaries, and to do more than talk about change while preserving the status quo.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently wrote in American Educator that more effort should be made to develop and evaluate teachers. She's 100 percent correct. Yet, during her prior post as president of the United Federation of Teachers, she didn't push as hard for programs to encourage that as she fought against NYC's Mayor Bloomberg's efforts to dismiss teachers alleged to be negligent and incompetent.

The union fought for teachers to be paid full salary and benefits while they did nothing but sit in reassignment rooms, (known as "rubber rooms") for years while their cases slogged through the system. This cost the city tens of millions of dollars a year.

If the union had supported the Board of Education's efforts to rid the system of inadequate and even harmful teachers, they would have greatly enhanced their own professional credibility. More importantly, that money might have been channeled into teaching poor teachers to be good teachers and good teachers to be excellent teachers.

Teachers also didn't use their considerable political clout to seriously challenge the "No Child Left Behind" Act of the Bush administration. Former Bush appointee, educational historian Diane Ravitch, now acknowledges that it left most children behind. All that emphasis on testing reading and math meant not only that teachers taught to the test, but also that important subjects such as history, art, and science were omitted from the curriculum.

A good educational program is much more than content; we can drum facts into a person's head and once they vomit it back on a test, it's usually gone pretty quickly. Ask those of us who had years of education how much we remember from most of our classes and the

answer is predictably low. All I remember from a Penn State class in "History of the Far East" is why they don't generally provide knives in Chinese restaurants.

We need to teach children to think; the world they live in is going to change whether any of us like it or not. Increasingly complex problems require analytic minds, not factoid factories.

Since the 1970s, a small number of philosophy professors have worked to integrate such lofty ideas as life and death, fairness, and respect into elementary school curriculum. And why not? Children think about those things and schools are a good place to encourage them to articulate and discuss them. Some schools do so in the Circle Time that begins most days; Quaker schools do it during weekly meetings for worship.

But if you are teaching to a state or national standardized test, this type of exercise is a waste. When the test is over, the students will forever have to deal with life and these very same concerns.

The still-in-place Bush educational provisions have not raised student achievement but "dumbed down the schools," Ravitch wrote recently. One of her colleagues from the Bush Department of Education, Chester E. Finn, agrees with her. He, like Education Chancellors Joel Klein (NYC) and Michelle Rhee (Washington, DC), want to blow up the system up and start from scratch. "We are always going to put the best interests of kids above the rights, privileges and priorities of adults," Rhee said. Why is that considered a radical notion?

Take a look at the educational practices in other countries and compare them with ours; the standards for both teachers and curricula are vastly lower in the USA than elsewhere. Studies demonstrate that education majors rank below most other disciplines on standardized tests themselves. The best and the brightest are doing something other than teaching our children. How smart is that? How does a country, which pioneered public education for all, accept poor quality education for so many?

A big problem is the way that we teach teachers, both in the schools of education and once they are on the job. Some prominent teacher educators claim that good teachers are born, not made. I think that's overly simplistic; while many people have a gift, virtually everyone can improve.

The Holmes Group, a consortium of deans of colleges of education formed almost 25 years ago, acknowledged that they do a poor job of training teachers. In this week's New York Times, that same point was emphasized: way too much theory, way too little about how to teach effectively.

A quarter century later and real reform has not yet arrived. The curriculum for training teachers has not changed or improved. Even more appalling, when new teachers are hired, they are in their own classrooms with little or no supervision and an appalling lack of the most important component present in other professions: mentoring.

Where are the master teachers to watch and offer constructive criticism? Why must each new teacher learn what works on his or her own? Why do we have such high turnover in a profession that we profess is one of the most important in society?

Do we really have time to debate this issue, when our children are moldering in archaic pedagogical institutions? Instead of attending rallies against change and against taxes,


when taxes are what pay for schools, we should be demanding more. If we don't sacrifice for our children, then where is our future?

Think about it.

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