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What if it turned out that education reform, with its teacher-blaming assumptions, got it all wrong in the first place?

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Recently, with “California’s Public Education Charade,” [UT-San Diego](#) shocked no one by publishing yet another anti-union, teacher-bashing editorial that attacks California’s “dominant Democratic Party” for believing that “what’s good for the California Teachers Association and the California Federation of Teachers is good for California. And what’s good for students, who cares?”

The sins of California’s Democrats, the State Board of Education, and their sinister union bosses include the decision to “suspend the Academic Performance Index [API] for a second year as the state moves to a more complex system of evaluating school and district performance” and failing to robustly follow the lead of the misguided Vergara decision which blamed tenure for the struggles of low-income minority students. California, the editorial board laments, has made it “even more difficult to fire bad teachers.”

Of course, these are precisely the kind of oft-repeated yet totally unfounded assertions one hears about public education and teachers from not just the mouthpiece of Manchester but from far too many in the media. Just because they keep saying it, however, doesn’t make it true.

As one of the country’s preeminent experts on education, Diane Ravitch, points out in response to those bemoaning the loss of “accountability” measures like the API, it’s hard to understand why anyone “thinks that using test scores to rank students, teachers, and schools will ‘close’ the achievement gaps. It hasn’t worked anywhere. Tests are a measure, not instruction. Measuring kids more often doesn’t raise their achievement.”

Indeed, as she explains, rather than giving feedback that might improve schools, the fact is that relying solely on the API provides little useful information to help make schools better: “Will California officials be surprised to learn that they cannot see the item analysis, they can see only the scores? Exactly how can they improve student performance when the tests provide no diagnostic information for any individual student?”

So perhaps moving away from the overuse of high-stakes testing to a system of evaluation that considers other factors as well such as student attendance, dropout rates, access to educational materials, English proficiency, and more seems wise. One might even argue that instead of

evidence that California is failing to be what the *UT-SD* considers to be a “normal state” (like Wisconsin or other right-to-work states, presumably), we are ahead of the curve with our response to a growing national movement that the [Washington Post](#) notes, “pulls in parents and community members from widely varying political perspectives” against the overuse of standardized testing and the assault on public education.

This movement, whose goals are “to dramatically reduce the amount of testing, end high stakes uses, and implement educationally sound assessments,” is increasing as the failures of over-testing become clear. But to acknowledge that would put a monkey wrench into the *UT-SD*’s anti-teacher propaganda machine, so down it goes into the memory hole where it can cause no uncomfortable cognitive dissonance.

Equally problematic is the “teachers versus students” frame that my wife Kelly Mayhew and I [addressed in this column](#) immediately after the Vergara decision last June when we wrote that, “Pitting our child against his teachers, as the ‘Vergara’ lawsuit seeks to do, is a fool’s errand. It destroys any sense of community in our schools and heaps scorn on the very people we all want to trust with our children’s futures. The interests of teachers and students are not diametrically opposed, as so many in the corporate education reform industry would have us think, but rather inextricably linked. When we disrespect teachers, we demean our education system and do nothing to help students.”

In that same column we note that the Vergara decision was not brought by a civil rights organization, but by “a conservative Silicon Valley millionaire and corporate education reformer who has been funding a group called ‘Students Matter’ and is part of the larger assault on public education by moneyed interests.” For a good primer on corporate education reform, go [here](#).

We also observe that the lawsuit’s central flaws include the fact that it ignores the key role of poverty, undermines academic freedom, does nothing to improve instruction, and will make it harder to attract and retain quality teachers.

The bottom line is clear: the problem is not that we cannot fire enough bad teachers but rather that we cannot recruit and keep enough teachers, period.

On this point, a recent [NPR piece](#), “Where Have All the Teachers Gone?”, observes that the exodus of young people from the teaching profession is continuing at an alarming rate, “In California, enrollment [in education degree programs] is down 53 percent over the past five years. It’s down sharply in New York and Texas as well. In North Carolina, enrollment is down nearly 20 percent in three years.” This is the direct result, as many educators will tell you, of the unrelenting demonization of the profession that you see in places like the *UT-SD* editorial page and elsewhere:

There’s a growing sense . . . that K-12 teachers simply have less control over their professional lives in an increasingly bitter, politicized environment.

The list of potential headaches for new teachers is long, starting with the ongoing, ideological fisticuffs over the Common Core State Standards, high-stakes testing and efforts to link test

results to teacher evaluations. Throw in the erosion of tenure protections and a variety of recession-induced budget cuts, and you've got the makings of a crisis.

All of this is why, in a recent [Gallop poll](#), “[When asked] whether their ‘opinions seem to count’ in the workplace, teachers ranked dead last among surveyed professions.”

And the assault on teachers isn't just an accident either. In addition to right wing editorialists and billionaires posing as civil rights activists, other corporate education reform outfits are trying to disguise their efforts to give them a populist feel. As [AlterNet](#) recently reported, Students First, afraid that it might be losing political influence, is now going to individuals outside of the organization and “offering to pay them to blog and social media comment in favor of its preferred anti-teachers’ union policies.”

But the problem for public education goes beyond well-funded ideologues and the conservative press. In another great [AlterNet](#) piece, “How Bad Media is Driving the Collapse of Our Once Great Public Education System,” Jeff Bryant makes the point that when you see education reporting you should:

Be afraid, be very afraid, any time you see a reporter in the business media turn his or her attention to education and public schools. What will likely follow is a string of truisms used to prop up a specious argument, steeped in biased notions that were themselves picked up from ill-informed conversations promoted by other clueless business news outlets.

All of this chatter would be something best to ignore were it not for the fact that reporters and pundits from these outlets are often raised to prominence, labeled as “experts,” and lionized by political leaders and policy makers, while real authorities on education are overlooked or completely drowned out in the babble.

The same piece goes on to cite the work done by the watchdog group [Media Matters](#) that discovered the best way to be ignored by those who cover education is to be an educator. More specifically, what their research revealed is:

[W]henver cable news outlets such as CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC feature programming devoted to education, those segments hardly ever feature real educators.

Over all cable news channels, only 9 percent of guests in education segments were educators. This would be like CNBC reporting on the stock market and hardly ever consulting with experts on finance and investing or the CEOs of publicly traded companies.

Print and online news outlets aren't much better. Tone recently came across [a study](#) that found “education experts” often cited in print and online news stories “may have little expertise in education policy.” The study found that the “experts” who are cited the most often are neither career educators nor scholars who've published and achieved advanced degrees; rather, they tend to be individuals from influential right-wing think tanks, with little to no scholarly work or graduate-level degree work in education.

Tone links to a write up of the study in [ScienceDaily](#) that explains the researchers found so-called education experts associated with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative

think tank based in Washington, DC, “were nearly 2.5 times more likely to be cited” than were career educators and education scholars.

In the online world, experts affiliated with AEI and the libertarian group Cato Institute were, respectively, 1.5 to 1.78 times more likely to be mentioned in blogs.

The authors conclude their findings are “cause for concern because some prominent interest groups are promoting reform agendas and striving to influence policymakers and public opinion using individuals who have substantial media relations skills but little or no expertise in education research.”

And here in San Diego, we see the results of this lack of experience or expertise in education and/or connection to moneyed interests pushing for corporate education reform not just at *UT-San Diego* but also at the *Voice of San Diego*. The *VOSD*'s nearly uniformly negative coverage of San Diego schools is clearly in line with the interests of local [corporate education reformers](#) some of whom just happen to be [on the board](#) of *VOSD* or on their top [donor list](#).

While *VOSD* reporting usually lacks the cartoonish outrage exhibited by the *UT-SD* editorial board, its emphasis is unmistakable as is made clear by their [coverage](#) of the suspension of the API system which bemoaned the move to include more qualitative factors in the evaluation of schools as being “hard to quantify” and went on to focus on the potential problems this poses for charter schools like the ones promoted by one of the *Voice*'s founders.

The sources for the *VOSD* story are EdSource, the *UT-SD*, and the regional director from the California Charter Schools Association. Distinctly missing, as usual, is the perspective of an actual educator. Directly underneath the story as of this writing is an ad for, you guessed it, a charter school. So while the *UT-SD* regularly pounds the table against traditional public schools and teachers, the *VOSD* more subtly relies on framing for the same effect.

If anything in particular characterizes the ideological bias of the *Voice*'s educational frame it is a relentless Taylorism that exhibits a near-quasi religious faith in the gospel of data and measured outcomes favored by the corporate education movement. The problem with this is, as the *Washington Post* notes, there is “no real evidence tying . . . rapid expansion of charters, closing low-performing schools, more testing, elimination of tenure and seniority for teachers, and test-based teacher evaluation” to better outcomes.

Indeed, the conclusion of more and more scholars like Gary Orfield and Patricia Gandara, who study educational inequities at UCLA's Civil Rights Project, is that the central emphasis of the contemporary corporate education reform movement is “a tragic distraction.”

As [Capital & Main](#) reported recently:

But what if it turned out that education reform, with its teacher-blaming assumptions, got it all wrong in the first place? That's the conclusion being drawn by a growing number of researchers who, armed with a mountain of fresh evidence, argue that 30 years of test scores have not measured a decline in America's public schools, but are rather a metric of the country's child poverty—the worst among developed nations—and the broadening divide of income inequality.

Eds. Note: The entire *Capital & Main* article was [re-posted at SD Free Press](#) this morning.

Sadly, however, such revelations simply don't fit the dominant media frame so they are relegated to the margins despite their profound importance.

The result of our limited media landscape is that basically the only things San Diegans and most Americans hear about their public schools is how bad they are or [what an outrage](#) it is that someone like Diane Ravitch had something nice to say about them. But, to quote Ravitch's [response](#) to Scott Lewis's broadside attack on her for daring to be positive about San Diego's schools, "I am sorry that there are commentators in San Diego who disparage public education. It is a cornerstone of our democracy. We must make it better and stronger in every community."

And to do that we might just have to think about permanently extending the Proposition 30 taxes on the rich and asking corporations to pay their fair share to better fund quality education rather than allowing them to "disrupt" our public education system in a way that only perpetuates inequality for all. But that would require the media to ask hard questions about economics and power in San Diego and American society as a whole rather than bashing public education and scapegoating teachers.

Full disclosure: *As I have mentioned many times in this column, I'm a career educator at City College and, worse yet, a member of a union with a kid in a public school. Be afraid, dear reader, very afraid.*