

The anti-dissing strike

By Neal McCluskey 4:50 PM 09/12/2012

Let's get one thing straight: the Chicago [Teachers](#) Union strike isn't about what's best for kids, no matter how much unionists insist it is. It is ultimately about bruised egos, and staying unaccountable.

That reality is made clear by the regular refrain of Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, of which the CTU is an affiliate. As she wrote in this morning's USA Today, "no one wants to strike ... this strike comes on the heels of numerous steps that left teachers feeling disrespected."

That teachers have been the victims of brutal dissing has been the complaint of their unions for years, a mantra that's coincided especially with efforts to assess teachers' performance using, at least partially, the achievement of their students. That, and people have increasingly put two and two together: Many students aren't learning, teachers have the greatest in-school impact on learning, therefore the [teaching](#) force needs an upgrade.

To be fair, union leaders are right to point out — as they have in Chicago — that what goes on with kids outside of school often has a bigger impact than what goes on inside, and mechanisms for tying test scores to individual teachers are imperfect.

But reformers addressing something that's backed by good logic and evidence — teaching needs to improve — isn't "disrespecting" teachers any more than it's dissing players to point out that the Seattle Mariners — who have the worst batting average in Major League Baseball — need to improve their hitting. The conclusion might be empirically debatable, but the intention is clearly to address a troubling reality.

And this strike can't — or at least shouldn't — be about pay or benefits. Depending on whether you ask the union or the district, the average Chicago teacher gets paid between \$71,000 and \$76,000 a year. Either figure exceeds the national mean income for people with bachelors or masters degrees — \$57,000 and \$69,000, respectively — and is even more generous when one considers teachers' built-in vacation time.

Which is not to say some teachers don't deserve greater compensation — what a teacher gets paid should depend on how much customers are willing to offer — but it is impossible to claim that Chicago's teachers are grossly underpaid.

The victims of this raging pity party, obviously, are Chicago's public school children, some 350,000 of whom aren't getting the education that unionists often opine it is the sacred duty of government to provide. It is crucial for “democracy,” we are told, to have government schooling. But apparently democracy — or at least deferring to democratically elected officials — must be sacrificed when the unimaginable evil of disrespect rears its head.

Of course government schooling doesn't really serve democracy; it serves the people employed by the system. It's a simple matter of incentives: On any given issue politicians will tend to respond to the groups most active on that issue, and no one has greater incentive to be involved in education politics than those who draw their livelihoods from it. And what will they demand? What we'd all like: as much money as possible and no accountability for performance.

The natural counterweight to these groups should be parents and taxpayers, but parents, a large and fragmented group, don't have the ability to organize as effectively for education politicking, and taxpayers have to worry about all the ways government squanders their money, not just education.

There is, though, perhaps a way to align the incentives of educators and students, at least if teachers are truly worried not about being held accountable, but that imposed accountability systems won't work.

School choice would let parents take their children and the money to educate them to any school they like, and give educators the freedom to set up schools however they see fit. Then teachers would cease having assessment systems “disrespectfully” imposed on them, and system-wide accountability would come from good schools attracting and retaining students, and bad ones going out of business.

Unfortunately, the one thing teachers unions seem to hate even more than tying compensation to test scores is breaking up the government schooling monopoly. But if they want to stop all the dissing, they might just need to start earning their money.

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