

Two Thoughts on Education This Week: The Double-Speak of Dennis Van Roekel

September 23, 2011 [1 Comment](#) by RiShawn Biddle

A Little Consistency, Please, Mr. Van Roekel: Maybe the ghost of idiosyncratic-yet-militant teachers union legend Albert Shanker had taken a hold of him. Or perhaps, he is a little jealous of all the attention Randi Weingarten gets from her failed triangulation of the school reform movement. But National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel attempted to play the role of school reformer during an “education braintrust” session held yesterday at the Congressional Black Caucus’ annual legislative pow-wow.



Between harrumphs about how the NEA is pushing for its form of school reform lite (essentially, keeping the status quo quite ante), Van Roekel told the crowd that the “all 9000 delegates at our assembly voted to endorse president Obama for a second term because he is a friend of education.” The fact that the Obama administration has all but ignored both the NEA or the American Federation of Teachers, has long had an acrimonious relationship with the two unions because they oppose the administration’s school reform agenda, and does little other than throw taxpayer dollars to them in order to help congressional Democrats secure at least partial control of Congress, doesn’t come up. Nor does Van Roekel admit that these days that Democrats at the state level are calling the shots, essentially helping to weaken its influence over education policy.

But that’s nothing compared to his musings on teacher quality. Declaring that school reformers have “wasted the last 18 months debating tenure, Van Roekel then proclaimed that the real problem lies with the abysmal way America recruits and trains its teachers. From where he sits, the “system of recruitment, training and hiring is broken” and needs an overhaul. This means changing the “system on the front end”, by improving how aspiring teachers are developed and trained before they go into classrooms.

Van Roekel is right. The low quality of teacher recruiting and training is one of the reasons why academic instruction in our classrooms is in such sorry shape. There would be less of a need for firing laggard teachers if ed schools did a better job of recruiting those aspiring to get into the profession. But Van Roekel would have more credibility arguing this point if the NEA wasn’t such a strong supporter of the very ed schools that bring in low-quality talent into the profession in the first place.

After all, it is the NEA that has long had comfy relations with the nation's ed schools, even to the point of [subsidizing](#) the operations of the very trade groups that defend them from the systemic overhaul reformers have long championed. In 2009-2010, the NEA ladled out \$381,576 to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which oversees teacher training programs, according to its filing with the U.S. Department of Labor; that's part of \$1.9 million the union gave to the group over a five-year period. In 2008-2009, the union handed out \$252,262 to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the main trade group for ed schools.

With such financial and political leverage, the NEA could have forced ed schools into embracing reforms of its recruiting and training; the union could have even helped the National Council on Teacher Quality force ed schools into cooperating in the rating of ed schools it is conducting with *U.S. News and World Report*. The union has been silent on both counts. More importantly, Van Roekel fails to admit that the traditional teacher compensation system it defends — including near-lifetime employment in the form of tenure — is as much of the problem with teacher quality as recruiting and training. After all, what highly-talented collegian, especially one in math and science, would want to work in a profession in which the full compensation package — including \$2 million in defined-benefit pension payments — cannot be reaped until they spend a decade or longer in the profession (and be forced to work with laggard colleagues who are paid the same wage to boot)? The work rules that the union defends also makes it difficult for districts to do the kind of innovative practices — including [increased specialization at the elementary school level](#) — that can make teaching a [more-sophisticated and attractive profession](#) in the knowledge-based economy.

Van Roekel is certainly right about the need to improve teacher recruiting and training. But his union should set a better example on that front by pushing for systemic reform.

More on Rick Hess' Achievement Gap Thoughtlessness: Over the past two days, American Enterprise Institute education czar Rick Hess attempted to defend his [recent pieces](#) declaring that focusing on the achievement gap has siphoned research, policymaking and funding away from addressing other educational issues, and “has pushed all other considerations to the periphery”. Your editor could spend days tearing up what Dave Eggers would call Hess' heartbreaking works of staggering nonsense. But I'll stick to a series of specious examples he has used to prove his point.

Hess has argued that the achievement gap has excluded focus on subjects that aren't considered core because they aren't tested. One particular data point, which he culls from the [Center for Applied Linguistics](#) that the share of elementary schools offering foreign language courses has been in decline. Funny enough, Hess' argument is similar to those offered by the very education traditionalists with whom he has long foisted, who have argued for the past decade that the expansion of standardized testing has led to the narrowing of curricula. And as the traditionalists have been wrong on that point, Hess is off-base on this subject as well.

The fact that foreign languages are generally offered at the middle- and high-school level immediately makes Hess' citation rather suspect; the decline was only from 31 percent of elementary schools to 25 percent between 1997 and 2008, which is not all that significant. At the high school level, foreign language courses remains constant, with 91 percent of all high schools offering those course. More importantly, Hess' argument fails to [consider evidence](#) that offerings of music and art courses — which should also be in decline — remain as much a part of elementary- and secondary-school offerings as social studies.

Meanwhile Hess also tries to use the recent PISA data — which shows that America's students, especially its top-performers, are trailing the rest of the world academically — to prove his point. The problem? This is not a recent trend. American students have been trailing their peers in literacy, numeracy and science for the past four decades, long before the current focus on stemming the achievement gap. In fact, this woeful performance compared to the rest of the world is one of the reasons why school reformers began focusing on closing achievement gaps in the first place. The more minority students moving from failure to academic proficiency, the more high-performing students and future entrepreneurs and workers this nation will have in an increasingly global economy.

Again, Hess should stop the intellectual madness. And just move off this dead horse of a theory.

Errata:

- Adam Emerson at Redefine Ed [takes Education Sector's Richard Lee Colvin to task on vouchers](#). And rightfully so. I admire Colvin's work (after all, I did [write a study](#) for him while he was at the Hechinger Institute). But [Colvin gets some things wrong](#) when it comes to his view on vouchers. In particular, he wrongly casts the voucher debate as merely one between free-marketeers and education traditionalists, failing to consider the wide array of liberal Democrat reformers, urban families and others who are fans of vouchers (as well as libertarian think tanks such as the Cato Institute that now think vouchers are not worth considering). I can go on and on. But I won't. For now.
- Next week, I will take apart [Pedro Noguera's claptrap](#) on vouchers, which appears today at NBC's Education Nation Web site. And yes, Noguera once again proves that as wonderfully passionate as he may be when it comes to improving education for black males, he sticks to the kind of thoughtless education traditionalist beliefs that have helped create the problem in the first place. Expect Pedro to not take any more kindly to [my thoughts than he did the last time I paid him mind](#).
- **Voices of the Dropout Nation in Quotes: No Child Department:** "No Child has allowed us to identify the problems. It's not enough to have 100 percent of the data. You have to know what is happening by subgroups." — Virginia Congressman Bobby Scott at yesterday's Congressional Black Caucus pow-wow on education.