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Learning Curve

Teachers' unions are selfish, dangerous, and necessary.

Jonathan Chait March 17, 2011 | 12:00 am

Scott Walker, the Republican governor of Wisconsin, recently took to the op-ed page of *The Wall Street Journal* to tell the sad tale of Megan Sampson. Having just been named Outstanding First Year Teacher, Sampson was let go by her school district, whose union rules require that any layoffs proceed on the basis of seniority.

The solution, Walker argued, was his budget-repair bill, which “reforms this union-controlled hiring and firing process by allowing school districts to assign staff based on merit and performance.” Of course, it would also crush the union altogether, a detail Walker’s op-ed failed to mention.

Teachers’ unions have taken a well-deserved beating in the court of public opinion. Steven Brill’s influential 2009 *New Yorker* story about the battle for education reform, the 2010 documentary *Waiting for Superman*, and piles of less famous journalism and research have shown the deleterious effects of teacher tenure in public schools. The debate has rapidly moved past any reasonable question about the defendants’ guilt and into the sentencing phase. Walker proposes the death penalty, and Republicans hope others emulate him.

Is there any cause for objection? Actually, yes. As problematic as a world with overpowering unions may be—and, as I’ll get to momentarily, it’s pretty bad—a world without teachers’ unions at all would have problems of its own. The answer is to rehabilitate rather than destroy the teachers’ unions.

That the unions’ preferred policies have failed is clear enough. Teacher effectiveness is the single most important determinate of a child’s educational success, and the best educators can teach vastly more—about a full grade more—than the worst educators. What’s more, experience helps teachers only for the first few years, after which additional years in the classroom have no relationship to teacher quality. Given all this, the union-driven policy of paying teachers based on seniority, with near-insurmountable hurdles to firing even the worst teachers, is borderline insane.

Unions insist that no perfect method for evaluating teachers exists. That's true. But surely *some* method of evaluating them—reform plans generally include students' improvement in standardized tests as up to half the evaluation criteria, with subjective evaluations by principals and fellow teachers accounting for the rest—makes more sense than paying them according to a criteria that bears no relationship to quality.

Critics have long assumed that altering these insane policies would require smashing the unions. Certainly no other interest group can muster the unions' organizational clout or depth of commitment to preserving the status quo. "The teacher's unions are too strong a force, and important fundraising source," wrote the Cato Institute's Adam Schaeffer on *National Review's* website, "for the Democratic establishment to betray."

Yet the Democrats' reluctance to betray the unions turns out to be about as strong as Newt Gingrich's reluctance to betray his wives. Cities like Denver, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., have implemented new ways of paying teachers on the basis of performance. The Obama administration, in perhaps its most undernoticed reform, used stimulus money to create a huge grant called "Race to the Top," which rewards states that overhaul their schools. The policy has resulted in a vast, nationwide spurt of education reform.

This development has begun to unsettle even the unions themselves. Last month, American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten offered to support a new plan to facilitate firing teachers deemed failures by their principals. It was the shrewd act of a group trying to ride a wave that threatens to wash it away altogether.

The reform momentum utterly belies the claims that the unions were too powerful, and the Democrats too beholden to them, to allow any overhaul of U.S. education. Unions may often fight sensible policies, but they don't always win.

With union recalcitrance in full retreat, it's worth stepping back and considering the broader liberal vision of education reform. That purpose is to remake teaching as a profession that both attracts top talent and weeds out failure. Enabling schools to fire poor teachers will not, by itself, make it easier for them to hire good ones. The quality of teachers largely reflects the price for them. And that price is low—teaching salaries rank near the bottom of occupational categories that require a college degree. Teaching recruits mostly from the bottom two-thirds of college graduates.

There is every reason to believe that, without pressure, the political system will invest too little in education. Politicians tend to work on short-term horizons. Things like roads or lower taxes, offer tangible benefits to voters. The benefits of better schools, by contrast, tend to accrue well into the future. Voters often set local tax rates to fund education, and the constituency that votes most consistently and doggedly is the elderly, who will not get to enjoy the productivity gains of stronger education.

Even if both politicians and voters were acting out of far-sighted motives, a significant share of students eventually move away from the town or the state where they attended public school. When choosing between improving its graduates and improving the riverfront, government can hardly overlook the fact that many of the students will move away while the riverfront will stay put.

Teachers' unions provide a natural bulwark against the political system's tendency to under-invest in education. Transforming education from a low-risk civil service job into a high-reward, high-status occupation requires both doing away with tenure *and* creating the political will to pump money into a system that deserves to have money pumped into it.

Teachers' unions may still resist a world like that. (The Washington, D.C., chapter of the AFT famously refused to consider an offer that would allow-not require—teachers to give up tenure protection in return for the chance to earn salaries well into six figures.) But they can't hold off reform forever. And, after the worst aspects of the tenure system disappear, education reformers will discover that teachers are their best allies.

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