

12-1988

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Abstract

[Excerpt] The response to what many believe to be a serious decline in educational achievement and standards has been, so far, a spate of studies, commissions, and reports, all aiming toward reform of the education system. Most of the recommendations that have been implemented to date have come about through state-level legislation and mandates (Darling-Hammond and Berry, 1988). Education reformers disagree on the role of teacher bargaining in achieving their objectives. One wing of the reform movement believes collective bargaining is an obstacle to change and maintains collective bargaining is one reason the schools are in bad shape. But another wing holds that collective bargaining can and must be used as the vehicle of change in our schools.

Although the recommendations contained in these reports are wide-ranging, covering everything from school finance to curriculum to educational technology, in this paper our emphasis will be on proposals dealing with such matters as how teachers are to be recruited, retained, compensated, and deployed. And just as the so-called reform movement is a reaction to the process of education, the reform movement has engendered a reaction among teacher organizations. As we shall see, although that reaction has been anything but wholeheartedly accepting, neither has it been uniformly hostile.

Keywords

education, reform, teachers, recruitment, compensation

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Human Resources Management | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

Suggested Citation

Doherty, R. E. & Lipsky, D. B. (1988). The education reform movement and the realities of collective bargaining [Electronic version]. *Proceedings of the Forty-First Annual Meeting of the Industrial Relations Research Association* (pp. 51-59). Champaign, IL: Labor and Employment Relations Association.

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IV. EDUCATION REFORM AND TEACHER BARGAINING

The Education Reform Movement and the Realities of Collective Bargaining

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The Crisis in Education

Americans are worrying about how well our children are being educated. One source of that worry is that we have over the past several years been losing our competitive edge, and that loss, many believe, is connected to the declining educational achievement of American workers, as measured by SAT scores and other indices of student achievement. "We hear so much about positioning America to compete," Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos said recently. "How can we achieve what we want to achieve if our citizens are not educated to their highest potential?" (Tolchin, 1982).

Still another source of worry is the troubling fact that over 20 million American adults, most of whom are products of our public school system, are functionally illiterate. Beyond what this grim statistic may imply in respect to economic growth is the fear that our system of democratic government is imperiled by a badly educated and ill-informed citizenry.

The response to what many believe to be a serious decline in educational achievement and standards has been, so far, a spate of studies, commissions, and reports, all aiming toward reform of the education system. Most of the recommendations that have been

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implemented to date have come about through state-level legislation and mandates (Darling-Hammond and Berry, 1988). Education reformers disagree on the role of teacher bargaining in achieving their objectives. One wing of the reform movement believes collective bargaining is an obstacle to change and maintains collective bargaining is one reason the schools are in bad shape. But another wing holds that collective bargaining can and must be used as the vehicle of change in our schools.

Although the recommendations contained in these reports are wide-ranging, covering everything from school finance to curriculum to educational technology, in this paper our emphasis will be on proposals dealing with such matters as how teachers are to be recruited, retained, compensated, and deployed. And just as the so-called reform movement is a reaction to the process of education, the reform movement has engendered a reaction among teacher organizations. As we shall see, although that reaction has been anything but wholeheartedly accepting, neither has it been uniformly hostile.

What can be learned from the identifiable characteristics of public school teachers, and how might those characteristics contribute to the current difficulty? First, to the extent SAT scores are a reasonably good indication of teacher quality, one cannot be reassured. According to the Carnegie study, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, the combined average SAT score of high school seniors planning to become teachers in 1985 was about 60 points lower than that of all college-bound students (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986). Moreover, the most talented teachers, at least as measured by the National Teachers Examination, tend to leave the profession much sooner than those demonstrating the least talent.¹

Attrition has always been a problem in the teaching profession, whether among the most or the least talented. For example, for elementary teachers in the age cohort 22-30 the attrition rate is 21 percent, substantially higher than the 13 percent rate for grade school teachers age 61-65. Junior and senior high school teachers average about 12 percent for the 22-30 age range. It is particularly troubling, given the importance of at least a modicum of scientific training for new entrants into the workforce, that 11.5 percent of math and science teachers leave teaching before reaching the age of 30 (Grissmer and Kirby, 1987).

¹ A North Carolina study showed that 62.5 percent of those scoring in the top 10 percent on the NTE left teaching within seven years whereas only 37.3 percent of those scoring in the bottom 10 percent left during that period (Schlechty and Vance, 1981).

It is no less troubling to hear that less than two-thirds of college graduates qualified to teach math and science actually go into teaching (Rumberger, 1984). And that could be because college graduates trained in those disciplines can, in New York State at least, command salaries upward of \$5,000 more in industry than they would get if they went into teaching (State Education Department, 1987).

Surely it is difficult to build a profession out of an occupation characterized by such a high turnover rate, particularly when turnover is the highest during the early years of employment. Indeed, it is probable that many teachers don't stick round long enough to master their craft.

There may have been a slight decline in attrition in recent years. (In New York State, for example, attrition fell from 12.8 percent in 1974 to 9.2 in 1984 [Grossmer and Kirby, 1987]). And there has been a small increase in the number of college freshmen indicating an interest in teaching. The figure was 8 percent in 1987, compared to 5 percent in 1983. But the 1987 figure must be compared to the figures of the late 1960s when the proportion was almost 25 percent (*Education Week*, 1988). We might also possibly draw some comfort from the fact that a growing number of men and women are leaving other occupations to train to become teachers. But the information on this new source of recruits is, at best, anecdotal (Berger, 1988); it would take a movement of extraordinary proportions to bring the teaching force up to the level needed. The authors of *A Nation Prepared* estimate that we will need 1.3 million new teachers between the present and 1992. That report also suggests that if we were to rely on newly minted college graduates alone to man the classrooms, 25 percent would have to go into teaching (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

Equally troubling are the statistics contained in a recent report prepared by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. According to the Metropolitan survey, 34 percent of public school teachers with less than five years experience say that they are likely to leave the profession within five years. Nor are the figures for those with five to nine years experience—30 percent—more encouraging (Daniels, 1988).

What all these figures seem to demonstrate is that we have an unstable, or potentially unstable, and not entirely happy teacher workforce. Nor does the quality of those remaining appear to be quite the calibre students and parents have a right to expect.²

² Levin (1988) has pointed out the strong correlation between teacher verbal ability and student achievement.

The Reform Movement

It would not be possible in this short space to summarize the several reports that come under the general rubric of educational reform. The single thread running through them is that we are in trouble and something dramatic needs to be done. The two reports that have received the widest attention are *A Nation at Risk*, essentially a product of the Reagan administration, and *A Nation Prepared*, the product of the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. If it is possible to so characterize, *A Nation at Risk* is the more conservative of the two documents; the emphasis is on lengthening the school day and year, more use of standardized tests, beefing up student discipline, etc. Little attention was paid to involving teachers in school policy decisions on a systematic basis. As for teacher compensation, the report advocated abandoning the traditional teacher salary schedule in favor of a system of merit or performance-based pay, as well as the development of career ladders and master teacher plans.

The Carnegie study, on the other hand, is more far-reaching and, we believe, has a greater likelihood of success. Although it contains many recommendations similar to those contained in *A Nation at Risk*, the Carnegie report differs in that it would provide a greater role for teachers and their organizations, and is less sanguine about merit schemes. Rather, *A Nation Prepared* recommends that "salary increments must be associated with different levels of responsibility" (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986). The report sees four categories of teachers (licensed, certified, advanced, and lead teacher) differentiated only by experience, functions, and competence. The experiment currently under way in the Rochester, New York, public schools is based in part on these recommendations. We shall have more to say about the Rochester experiment later.

The Realities of Collective Bargaining

As we pointed out earlier, teacher unions have not embraced these recommendations with open arms. Former Secretary Bennett complained: "In recent years, the Nation's largest teacher union—the National Education Association—has shown itself to be the most entrenched and aggressive opponent of education reform" (Bennett, 1987).

That observation could be but another example of the former Secretary's penchant for hyperbole, but NEA President Mary Futrell's comments on the Carnegie recommendations suggest that Bennett's criticism did not miss the mark entirely. "I have deep reservations

about some of the report's conclusions and recommendations," she wrote. The proposal to provide different pay scales for different levels of responsibility, she thought, "suggests that some teachers are more equal than others. And it is not adequately differentiated from the flawed and failed merit pay and job ladder plans" (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Albert Shanker's comments were far more friendly. Although he would have liked to have had more of his "ideas and differences withstand the Task Force process," Shanker concluded, "This report deserves full support. It promises to turn teaching into a full profession, make major structural changes in schools and take giant steps in the improvement of learning" (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986).

In a sense, the different response by the two union leaders is not surprising. The AFT's strength tends to be in the larger cities, and that seems to be where the greatest problems are, in discipline, achievement, dropout rate, and in just about any other measure one can think of. Many participants in the urban school districts—teachers, administrators, board members, and union leaders alike—believe the situation has become so desperate they are willing to try just about anything no matter how initially unsettling a significant change might be.

We do not mean to suggest that merely because a few AFT locals have begun to implement some of the reform proposals that the movement is well under way. Indeed, we see a great deal of hesitancy on the part of teachers, unions, and administrators. The reasons for this "foot-dragging" are understandable. First, the prevalent system of compensation that rewards teachers solely on the basis of experience and graduate training is an arrangement both teachers and administrators find comfortable. It makes no invidious comparisons among teachers, and it is simple to administer. Second, distinctions as to individual worth or competence are not all that easy to make. Nor do we know for certain that monetary incentives based on teacher performance reap the desired results. Does the possibility of grabbing the cash carrot cause teachers with lackluster records to improve their performance? Evidence on the effect such incentives have on performance in the nonteacher area is mixed at best. Third, earlier attempts to break out from the so-called lock-step system of compensation have not been successful. And most failed even in the absence of any collective resistance from organized teachers (Bacharach, Lipsky, and Shedd, 1984).

Still, we are in trouble. We don't recruit the most able of our own college graduates into teaching. We don't even get them from the top half. The attrition rate is far too high, and those most likely to leave early are among the most gifted. The most widespread system of compensation which treats all teachers as fungible is insensitive to market forces. We pointed out earlier the problems schools have recruiting and retaining math and science teachers.

We can take some encouragement, however, from the experiments now being conducted in several large districts. They provide evidence that at least some union leaders and administrators recognize the severity of the problem and are willing to risk new approaches. The Rochester experiment is a case in point.

Rochester is a large city school district that suffers from almost all of the ills of other urban districts. In August 1987 the Rochester City School District and the Rochester Teachers Association signed a three-year collective bargaining agreement that incorporates many of the recommendations contained in the Carnegie report, as well as other reports. First, the agreement will increase teacher salaries by over 40 percent by 1990. But teachers will be required to work 190, rather than 185, days a year and will relinquish some of their seniority rights. The pact also abolishes the traditional salary schedule, establishing instead four categories teachers can move through: interns, that is, first-year teachers without prior experience; residents, who have been interns but do not yet have permanent certification; professionals, or fully licensed teachers; and lead teachers, a position obtained through competition and reserved for teachers who have at least 10 years of experience and meet high standards of performance.³

Lead teachers can eventually earn up to \$70,000 a year. But they will work more hours and days and will waive seniority rights in assignments and transfers. Lead teachers will also spend at least half their time serving as mentors to other teachers.

The Rochester agreement assigns all teachers responsibility for personally overseeing a group of students, directs teachers to make home visits, and provides for other forms of student counseling. It also incorporates a pilot project called the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program that substantially revamps the traditional teacher evaluation system. PAR places primary responsibility for the

³ Rochester Teachers Association and Rochester City School District, *Agreement*, August 1987; Rochester Teachers Association and Rochester City School District, "Career in Teaching Plan: Joint Statement on Interns," May 1988. See also "Big Raises . . ." (1987).

evaluation of new teachers (or interns) in the hands of experienced teachers (or mentors). The Rochester agreement also establishes a school-based planning process that shifts major decision-making responsibilities from the district level to building-level "teams" of teachers and administration representatives.⁴

It is, of course, too early to assess the effects of this major experiment in reform on the quality of education provided in Rochester's schools. Indeed, one of the dangers Rochester faces is pressure to produce quick and demonstrable results. For our purposes, the lesson of the Rochester experiment is that collective bargaining is not necessarily the obstacle to reform that some critics claim it is. Instead, given the fact that 75 percent of the teacher workforce is organized, we think it likely that genuine reform can only be achieved through collective bargaining.

The willingness on the part of the Rochester teachers to participate in a scheme that departs so significantly from previous arrangements suggests that when a teacher union has reached maturity, experimentation is possible. When teacher unions are no longer threatened by school boards, legislatures, or by mass defection, we believe they will begin to be more accepting of compensation schemes that recognize differences in talent and responsibility.

The advantage of such schemes as we see in Rochester and elsewhere is not only that there is a real difference between the salary of a rank-and-file teacher and a "lead" teacher (as against the token difference characteristic of most merit plans), but more importantly, the differential is based as much on assuming additional responsibilities as it is on classroom performance. That alone should make this arrangement more palatable to teachers who have long been skeptical of plans grounded on performance-based distinctions. We also believe it possible that by establishing a hierarchy, competent and dedicated teachers may become even more competent and dedicated as they vie for the more responsible—and more highly paid—positions. As we pointed out earlier, we are not so sanguine about the effect this opportunity would have on the lackluster. Another possible result of Rochester-like experiments—and this could be the most important—would be a decline in the exodus of the most talented teachers from our public schools. Under the Rochester plan, for example, at least a few teachers can earn annual salaries of as much as \$70,000. We doubt

⁴ See note 3. See also Rochester City School District, *Peer Assistance and Review Program: 1986-87 Local Evaluation Report*, January 1988, and Gillett and Halkett (1988).

that many teachers so amply rewarded would look so longingly for employment in industry. It is not necessary for every teacher in a school to be excellent, but it is important that there be a few to set the tone and provide the proper example, thus encouraging others to perform just a little better. The Rochester plan seems to us to make that possible.

It will take some time (probably several years) before we know whether these experiments are successful, i.e., will there be greater student achievement under these more flexible systems than there has been (and is) under more rigid compensation arrangements? Improving student achievement, after all, is the primary goal; changing the way in which we deploy and compensate teachers is merely a means toward that end. There is a risk, however, that a public that often seeks instant panaceas will lack the patience to wait several years for a program to produce meaningful results.

We are, however, optimistic. The source of that optimism is the way in which some local teacher unions, with some encouragement at national levels, have embraced the reform movement. Several cherished union beliefs and practices that seem to frustrate reform proposals are giving way to more professional concerns. We believe that to be an important first step.