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The Politics of the Education Reform Movement: Some Implications for the Future of Teacher Bargaining

Abstract

[Excerpt] In summary, the ongoing battle over education reform and emerging demographic trends do not bode well for the success of reform efforts in this country and probably mean tougher, if nonetheless more interesting, days at the bargaining table.

In recent years taxpayers have been willing to support increased expenditures for public education. But sooner or later taxpayers will want to see results. Both liberal and conservative politicians have been staunch supporters of the school reform movement, but politicians are a notoriously fickle group.

To improve the quality of education, we need a sustained effort over an indefinite period of time. We need patience and resolve. But as the task of improving education gets tougher and tougher, many politicians are likely to turn their attention to other targets of opportunity. It may be that we are currently at the peak of the school reform movement — that the movement has crested and will recede in the face of political squabbles and frustrated hopes.

Keywords

education, reform, teachers, merit pay, bargaining

Disciplines

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

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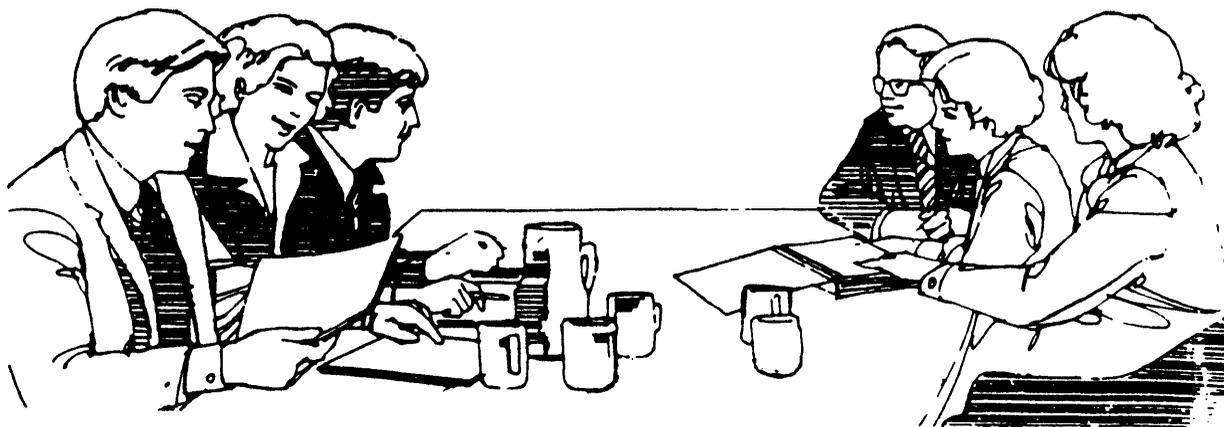
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The politics of the education reform movement:



Some implications for the future of teacher bargaining

by David B. Lipsky

When Terrell Bell came to Washington in 1981 to become Ronald Reagan's first secretary of education, he thought he would stay just long enough to fulfill one of President Reagan's campaign pledges: the dismantling of the Department of Education. But complaints about the deteriorating quality of education in this country were mounting and these complaints captured Secretary Bell's full attention.

In short order, Bell formulated a proposal to establish a National Commission on Excellence in Education, obtained the president's support, and proceeded to appoint members of the commission.

The result of the commission's work was the now-famous report, *A Nation at Risk*, published in April 1983. In the most frequently quoted passage, the commission said,

"The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today we might well have viewed it as an act of war."

The commission documented many signs of mediocre performance, such as declining scores on standardized tests, persistently high dropout rates, and growing level of functional illiteracy.

On the basis of its findings, the commission made many recommendations: reforming the curricula (more English, math, and science), lengthening the school day (to seven hours) and the school year (to at least 200 days), relying more on standardized tests, improving student discipline policies, and raising college admissions standards.

Its recommendations on teachers' pay proved to be especially controversial. In tandem with its view that teacher sala-

ries needed to be increased substantially, the commission advocated abandoning the traditional teacher salary schedule in favor of a system of merit pay, as well as the development career ladders and master teacher plans.

President Reagan endorsed most of the report, but concentrated his attention on the merit pay recommendation. In a commencement address at Seton Hall University, delivered in May 1983, Reagan said, "Teachers should be paid and promoted on the basis of merit . . . Hard earned tax dollars should encourage the best. They have no business rewarding incompetence and mediocrity."

The president's effort to make merit pay the centerpiece of the education reform effort provoked a strong reaction from the National Education Association (NEA) and, to a somewhat lesser degree, from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). In the aftermath of the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the gulf between the Reagan administration and the teacher unions widened.

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First wave of reform

The period that followed *A Nation at Risk* has been called the "first wave" of the education reform movement. Its initial focus was on a return to traditional values in the classroom. In part, it was clearly a reaction to the reforms of the 1960s.

In the 1960s, reform efforts had stressed values such as relevance, equity, and choice. Reformers of that period wanted to use the schools to promote equal opportunity and social welfare in society. Experiments with the open classroom and experience-based learning were the practical manifestations of reform efforts in the 1960s.

But in the 1980s, concerns with economic competitiveness and worker productivity shifted the focus of educational reformers. *A Nation at Risk* focused reform efforts on tougher and more uniform standards, the testing of teachers and students, and pay of teachers. In the 1980s, we began to stress sound training in the "3Rs" rather than relevance, excellence rather than equity, and selectivity rather than equal access. Our concerns with the competitiveness and productivity of the economy overwhelmed our concerns with equal opportunity and social welfare.

The first wave was thus a movement that emphasized conservative values and was led by conservative leaders such as President Reagan, Secretary Bell, Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander and others. William Bennett succeeded Bell. The key, in Bennett's view, is accountability. Accountability became the central theme sounded by the Reagan administration and its conservative allies.

The second wave

But the education reform movement of the 1980s was not the sole preserve of conservatives. In fact, it was—and is—a complex and multidimensional movement characterized by often-conflicting values and themes. A distinctive thrust of the movement grows out of the publication in 1986 of *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.

It can be fairly said that the second wave of reform was launched by *A*

Nation Prepared and continues to this day. The principal theme enunciated by the Carnegie report is the need to transform teaching "from an occupation into a profession."

To achieve this objective, *A Nation Prepared* offered numerous recommendations: abolish the bachelor's degree in education and require future teachers to major in one of the disciplines, create a new master's degree in teaching based on internships and residencies, restructure teaching staffs by creating new teaching positions (lead teachers, managing teachers), provide teachers with more support staff (paraprofessionals, interns, residents, people on loan from corporations, volunteers, etc.), and increase the pay to top teachers by 50 to 100 percent.

A Nation Prepared said that the new category of "lead teachers" should be chosen from highly-regarded, experienced teachers in a school, who would continue to teach but also would undertake a variety of other tasks such as the supervision of new teachers and the design of new curricula. Lead teachers and managing teachers, in the view of the Carnegie report, should manage the academic side of the schools while principals would have the scope of their responsibilities sharply reduced.

A Nation Prepared also called for the creation of a National Certification Board, which would be charged with setting standards for the profession as well as preparing and administering a national certifying exam for teachers comparable to the bar exam for lawyers. The Carnegie report recommended that a majority of the proposed board's members be drawn from the nation's outstanding teachers.

Subsequently, in May 1987, the Carnegie Foundation created the National Teacher Certification Board, headed by former North Carolina Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. A majority of board members are teachers; the board plans to issue its first certificates by 1990.

The recommendations contained in *A Nation Prepared* were warmly embraced by AFT President Albert Shanker, who said, "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."

It was less enthusiastically supported by NEA president Mary Hatwood Futrell, who said, "I endorse many of the [report's] ideas wholeheartedly," particularly those calling for higher teacher salaries and greater teacher involvement in educational decision-making. But Futrell expressed concern about the lead teacher concept because "it suggests that some teachers are more equal than others" and "it is not adequately differentiated from the flawed merit pay and job ladder plans."

Struggling for control

Despite Futrell's lukewarm support, however, the Carnegie report was viewed by many as strongly pro-teacher. Some education professionals have charged that implementation of the Carnegie recommendations would be tantamount to turning over control of the schools to the teachers. And in the view of some critics, this means ceding control of the schools to the teacher unions.

For example, last year, June Gabler, president of the American Association of School Administrators, said the new certification board "is an attempted takeover of American schools by the teacher unions." Others have noted that principals, superintendents, and school board members have played only a limited role in the Carnegie reform efforts.

Last year the National School Boards Association appeared prepared to challenge the NEA and AFT directly for the control of the schools. In April 1987, NSBA set up a task force to study "alternatives to collective bargaining in public education." At the time, Executive Director Thomas Shannon said, "Collective bargaining is a massive stumbling block to change. You can't have collegial relations in an adversarial setting." He suggested NSBA may be prepared to try to phase out collective bargaining in education.

The second wave of reform, in contrast to the first, reflects more liberal values. It has been led by Ernest Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation, Albert Shanker and the AFT, the deans of education schools who belong to the Holmes

(continued)

Group, and certain governors, mostly Democrats.

Despite the struggle to control the character of reform, across the country the movement has made considerable headway since *A Nation at Risk*. For the last five years, virtually every state legislature has made changes in the name of reform.

As of last year, 45 states had increased the number of core academic requirements for a high school diploma, 24 states had mandated increased teacher salaries, 38 states had instituted merit pay, master teacher, or some form of performance-based pay for teachers (or had provided incentives for local districts to do so), and 30 states had imposed competency tests for either new or current teachers.

Overall, state support for public education grew by 17 percent in that period—and by 25 percent in New York. The average teacher's salary in New York went from \$28,213 in 1985 to \$34,500 in 1988, an increase of 22 percent.

A lack of results

The disappointing news is that to date there are few signs that these reform efforts have produced bottom-line results. Although some indices of school performance, such as standardized test scores, have stabilized or even improved a bit after years of decline, there remains a popular perception that public education continues to deteriorate.

In the presidential campaign of 1988, both Vice President Bush and Gov. Dukakis supported measures to improve the quality of education, the former generally reflecting the views of the conservative reformers and the latter those of the liberal reformers, but the public remains wary of the promises of politicians.

Perhaps there is good reason to be wary. Education reformers—and the next president—are going to run head on into certain demographic and workforce trends that will make improving the quality of education difficult.

For example, *A Nation Prepared* estimates that we will need 1.3 million more teachers by 1992. That means that 23 percent of all new college graduates will have to go into teaching between now and then. This simply hasn't been hap-

pening and there is no prospect that it will happen in the future.

At the same time, young college-educated women, who were once the major source of new teachers, are taking advantage of opportunities in other occupations and professions. In the past, 65 or 70 percent of public school teachers were women. Twenty years ago, 65 percent of freshmen women planned teaching careers, but a recent survey revealed that the proportion has fallen to less than 10 percent.

Teacher shortage trends

There is likely to be a severe shortage of teachers in the next decade. There will be severe competition from business and industry for the same talent we would like to see in the classrooms. The increase in competition is likely to cause an increase in teacher salaries. Indeed, the recent escalation of teacher salaries may be more the result of teacher shortages and market competition than of the reform movement.

But will taxpayers continue to be willing to pay the high salaries necessary to recruit and retain high-quality teachers?

The Carnegie report recommended that lead teachers be paid \$52,000 to \$72,000 a year.

What may happen, in my view, is that many districts, rather than raising teacher salaries significantly, will simply reach further down into the talent pool to get the teachers they need to staff their classrooms. Such a strategy will frustrate the expectations of the school reformers—and probably will exacerbate tensions between teacher unions and school districts.

In the coming era of teacher shortages, wealthier districts *may* be able and willing to pay that kind of money, but without a significant source of new funds poorer districts will have to settle for lower rates of pay. If that happens, wealthier districts will be able to attract and retain talented teachers, but poorer districts may have to make do with inferior teachers. The gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" will grow under this scenario. Another sign of the looming teacher shortage is the large number of teachers who are teaching outside their area of certification or are

teaching subjects for which they have not been trained. A survey showed that one in six teachers is in this category, and the number is growing. The hopes of the reformers will not be fulfilled if school districts cannot get teachers who are properly trained to teach their assigned subjects.

Still another trend that will complicate the reform effort is the growing proportion of our student population that is black, Hispanic, or otherwise from disadvantaged families. Clearly the task of educating our students has grown more difficult as the proportion of educationally disadvantaged students has grown.

Collective bargaining's future

Finally, what of the future of collective bargaining in public education? If the analysis I have outlined here is correct, it is likely that bargaining in the 1990s will be tougher than it has been in the 1980s. We are likely to see more bargaining impasses and more strikes. Inevitably, salaries and compensation will be the central issues, but growing attention will be paid to alternative methods of compensation, such as performance-based pay, career ladders, and pay for extra duties.

The parties cannot consider alternative methods of compensation, however, without entering the thicket of teacher evaluation procedures, and I believe that means the parties will need to consider the adoption of peer review.

We already see signs of more focus on "professional" issues in teacher bargaining, and this trend is likely to continue. It is likely, for example, that the parties will experiment with schemes to increase teacher participation in running the schools—from choosing textbooks and determining curricula to choosing teachers to be hired. Some of these schemes will be based on the Carnegie model, and some on other models.

Most efforts to increase teacher participation, however, have had the effect of blurring the distinction between administrators and rank-and-file teachers. One consequence of blurring that distinction is that administrators will feel threatened and will need to be mollified. In addition, most bargaining statutes are constructed on the premise

that a sharp distinction exists between "supervisors" and "employees." It may be that these statutes will need to be revised to accommodate a new reality in teacher bargaining.

In summary, the ongoing battle over education reform and emerging demographic trends do not bode well for the success of reform efforts in this country and probably mean tougher, if nonetheless more interesting, days at the bargaining table.

In recent years taxpayers have been willing to support increased expenditures for public education. But sooner or later taxpayers will want to see results. Both liberal and conservative politicians have been staunch supporters of the school reform movement, but politicians are a notoriously fickle group.

To improve the quality of education, we need a sustained effort over an indefinite period of time. We need patience and resolve. But as the task of improving education gets tougher and tougher, many politicians are likely to turn their attention to other targets of opportunity. It may be that we are currently at the peak of the school reform movement—that the movement has crested and will recede in the face of political squabbles and frustrated hopes.

But I prefer to be an optimist. A sign of hope is the agreement reached last year by the Rochester School District and its AFT local, which incorporates many of the Carnegie concepts. What is most noteworthy about the Rochester agreement is not that it happens to be based on a particular model of school

reform (although it will certainly be interesting to see how that model works in practice), but rather the political courage, the willingness to take risks, and the spirit of cooperation that undergirded the district's and the union's joint enterprise. The parties in Rochester have been willing to confront directly the magnitude of the problem we face in public education and gamble that cooperation and innovation are the pathways to the future.

I believe all of us interested in improving the quality of education must be equally willing to rise above the political fray in the search for truly constructive solutions for our nation's educational skills. 