

Operation Discourage Bright People from Wanting to Teach (##)

November 1, 2010

Operation Discourage Bright People from Wanting to Teach

By Alfie Kohn

Education “reformers” have discovered the source of our schools’ problems. It’s not poverty or social inequities. It’s not enforced student passivity or a standardized curriculum that consists of lists of facts and skills likely to appear on standardized tests. No – it’s... teachers.

Fortunately, there’s a two-pronged solution: First, identify the really bad teachers (on the basis of their students’ test scores, naturally) and pluck them out like weeds. Second, as a safeguard against the possibility of more widespread incompetence than can be solved by step number one, remove as much authority as possible – about what’s to be taught and how – from all teachers.

Two articles in the October 2010 issue of Phi Delta Kappan address these strategies. “Incompetent Teachers or Dysfunctional Systems?” by Ken Futernick looks carefully at the premises – and real-world effects – of sacking teachers who fail to perform up to expectations. And Maja Wilson’s “There Are a Lot of Really Bad Teachers Out There” weighs

efforts to improve teaching by imposing mandates from above.

We should begin by noting that claims about the contribution of the quality of teaching to student success are often overstated, particularly by “reformers.” As Richard Rothstein reminds us, all school-related variables combined can explain only about one-third of the variation in student achievement; most is due to non-school factors. Still, even to the extent that the quality of teaching does matter, Futernick argues that “variations in teaching performance flow largely from variables that have little to do with the qualities of teachers themselves.” Lousy classrooms are more likely due to “poorly functioning systems than [to] individual [teachers’] shortcomings.”

If, for example, a lot of good teachers are quitting, or are assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise, then a purge of bad teachers isn’t going to help – particularly if that district doesn’t have better teachers waiting in the wings to replace them. Moreover, the “bad” teachers may not really be bad at all. Futernick points out that they may just “lack adequate support and resources” that would allow them to succeed. Not only is it unfair to blame them for what is really a systemic failure; it doesn’t help kids because that failure will persist even after we shuffle the personnel.

Of course it’s a lot easier to pretend the problem rests primarily with incompetent individuals, and therefore that all would be well if we could just eliminate tenure and those damned unions that make it hard to get rid of slackers (or anyone else an administrator would like to fire for whatever reason). In the meantime, though, the Powers That Be are producing uniform standards and curricula that will let them impose their will on classrooms from a distance. “If we can’t get rid of teachers’ physical selves,” says Maja Wilson, “we can replace their teaching selves with the standardized self of the mandated, scripted curriculum” and thereby assure

quality.

But whose definition of “quality”? Arne Duncan and Bill Gates have no better grasp of the nuances of how children learn, and what constitutes meaningful evidence of deep understanding, than does your next-door neighbor – which helps to explain why, when they talk about “quality” (or “achievement”), all they mean is higher standardized test scores. Unlike your neighbor, though, they have the power to compel schools – whole states, even – to enact practices that will cement that conflation into place.

Let’s assume for the sake of the argument, though, that some people in a position of power really do have an unusually good feel for how children learn. Wilson’s point is that great teaching can’t be imposed from above: “Mandating practices in the effort to improve teaching paradoxically creates the kind of environment that undermines good teaching... by stunt[ing] teachers’ ability to make good decisions in the classroom.”

There is simply no shortcut to helping educators “cultivate an active intelligence that allows them to negotiate principles, practices, students’ needs, and the ever-changing classroom and school environment.” In short, says Wilson (in a sentence that ought to be emailed to every administrator and consultant in the country), “Good teaching doesn’t rest on specific practices, but on how well the educator actively thinks through hundreds of decisions that no program can script.” To try to mandate specific practices – and Wilson offers some disconcerting examples relating to “literacy systems” – not only doesn’t help teachers to become more accomplished, flexible thinkers; it gets in the way.

*

Efforts to fire bad teachers and mandate specific practices weren’t devised in a vacuum. They emerge from a specific

cultural context. Specifically, this double-barreled strategy seems to reflect:

- * an arrogance on the part of decision makers that expresses itself in a predilection for top-down control – doing things to people rather than working with them;

- * the low esteem in which the profession of teaching is held. (It would seem outrageous for professionals in most other fields to be told how to do their jobs, particularly by people who aren't even in their field);

- * a widespread tendency to blame individuals rather than examining the structural causes of problems – something that distorts our understanding of such varied topics as cheating, self-discipline, competition, character education, and classroom management;

- * the outsize influence on education of business-oriented models, with a particular emphasis on quantification and standardization; and

- * the assumption that teaching consists of filling up little pails with information. If learning were understood instead as the active construction of ideas, it would seem odd, to say the least, to mandate certain teaching styles or a single curriculum for all students at a given grade level.

While there's no official name for the dual strategy of micromanaging teachers and trying to root out the bad ones, it might as well be called 'Operation Discourage Bright People from Wanting to Teach'. After all, who would choose to focus on test preparation rather than helping kids to think and question? Who would agree to forego any real professional autonomy? Who would want to be treated like a pet, rewarded with financial doggie biscuits for toeing the line? And who, if he or she had other opportunities, would pick a career that featured a constant threat of public humiliation?

In fact, it does seem likely that more and more college students who become teachers will be those who lack other opportunities. The impact of this isn't difficult to predict. What's less obvious is the ironic fact that it's due, in large part, to what's known – and uncritically celebrated in the popular press – as “school reform.”

Back to Blogs