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Super Teachers Alone Can't Save Our Schools

Extraordinary educators are rare and often burn out. To save our schools, says Steven Brill, we have to demand more from ordinary teachers and their unions.

By STEVEN BRILL

Associated Press

Trenise Duvernay teaches a fourth-grade math class at the Alice M. Harte Charter School in New Orleans. Charter schools make up a small part of the public school system.

A superstar teacher or charismatic principal rides to the rescue! Downtrodden public school children, otherwise destined to fail, are saved! We've all seen that movie—more than once, starting with "Stand and Deliver" and "Lean on Me" in the late 1980s and more recently with documentaries like "Waiting for Superman" and "The Lottery," which brilliantly portray the heroes of the charter-school movement. And we know the villains, too: teachers' union leaders and education bureaucrats who, for four decades, have presided over schools that provide comfortable public jobs for the adults who work there but wretched instruction for the children who are supposed to learn there.

One of the heroes of this familiar tale is Dave Levin, the co-founder of the highly regarded KIPP network of charter schools (KIPP stands for Knowledge Is Power Program). But Mr. Levin would be the first to tell you that heroes aren't enough to turn around an American public school system whose continued failure has become the country's most pressing long-term economic and national security

threat.

Reforming America's troubled education system requires a new commitment to training teachers and holding them accountable for their performance, says Steven Brill, author of "Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools." But how do you push them to perform without burning them out? And what role should the unions play in this process? Brill discusses with Weekend Review Editor Gary Rosen.

47.4 million: *Students in public schools**

3.3 million: *Teachers in public schools**

1 million: *Students in charter schools*

72,000: *Teachers in charter schools*

**Excluding charters / Source: U.S. Department of Education, 2008*

Earlier this year, Mr. Levin gave me a tour of his spectacularly successful school in upper Manhattan. As we walked the halls of a building that KIPP shares with a conventional public school, he marveled at all that had happened in the 18 years since his friends and family wondered why a Yale grad like himself "would go teach in some ghetto school in Houston."

Today, he said, "We've got all these wonderful schools in places like Harlem. We've got two movies taking up the cause. We've got Oprah, you name it."

"So you must feel pretty good," I said.

"Well, that's it, I don't," he replied.

"It's really sad and outrageous what's happening to the children on the other floors of this building," he added, referring to the public school that shares the building. "But we're failing a lot, every day, on this floor, too."

To make his point, he walked me into the back of one of his classrooms. It seemed to me like most other KIPP classrooms—full of focused, connected children with a magnetic teacher at the front of the room. But to Mr. Levin, there was a lot wrong with this picture.

When we left the room 20 minutes later, he rattled off four things that he had seen misfiring: an imperfect bulletin board, three students whose eyes were wandering, the teacher turning her back to face the blackboard, an incomplete reading log.

"Making all those things work is the job," he continued. "It's exhausting, and it's not exciting, but it's what you have to do."

Mr. Levin acknowledged that he was at least free to try because he was not straitjacketed by a union contract. He could hire and fire as he pleased, set work hours, move the staff around—everything that he needed to make KIPP work.

In his new book,"Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools," Steven Brill describes how an unlikely coalition of fed-up public school parents, Ivy League idealists, hedge-fund managers, civil rights activists, conservative Republicans and insurgent Democrats has come together in recent years to try to turn around America's declining education system. His story includes this prescription for bridging the differences between the reformers and their chief antagonists—the teachers' unions.

"That's totally true," he said. But "if you tore up every union contract in the country, that would just give you the freedom to try.... Then you would have to train and motivate not 70,000 or 80,000 teachers"—the number now teaching in charter schools—"but three million," the approximate number of teachers in American public elementary and secondary schools.

As Mr. Levin explained to me, "You can't do this by depending only on the kinds of exceptional people we have around here who pour themselves into this every hour of every day."

"I feel overwhelmed, underappreciated and underpaid," a teacher told me one morning at one of the Success Charter Network schools in Harlem. Like KIPP, these are schools whose students consistently top the charts in achievement scores, often testing at or above the level of students in affluent nearby suburbs.

"I work from 7:30 to 5:30 in the building and then go home and work some more," the teacher told me. "I get disrespectful pushback from parents all the time when I try to give their kids consequences. I get feedback from my [supervisors], who demand that I change five or six things by the next day. I think we are doing a great job, so I keep at it. But there is no way I can do this beyond another year or two."

A few days later, Eva Moskowitz, the founder of the Success Charter Network, conceded to me that not everyone is cut out for this work. But "to say that we can't scale this is like saying we can't build the Brooklyn Bridge because it's hard," she said. "Sure, we have turnover, but our teachers make good money," and "they can advance quickly."

Associated Press

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2009.

"I have [assistant principals] who are 28 years old and making $100,000 or $120,000, who get six weeks' vacation," Ms. Moskowitz said. "How bad a career path is that?"

One of the assistant principals was Jessica Reid, whom I had been following for more than a year. Ms. Reid had pushed her students forward so successfully that Ms. Moskowitz had promoted her in the fall of 2010, when she was, indeed, just 28.

In January I met with Ms. Reid to talk about burnout, among other issues. She quickly volunteered, "I know I can't do this forever. And I know if I had a child I couldn't do it. As it is, it is screwing up my marriage."

Already thin, Ms. Reid said she was losing weight and never seemed to be able to get away from her work. She recounted how, the night before, she had had to get off the treadmill during one of her now rare weekday trips to the gym in order to spend a half hour "arguing with a parent who thought I was being too hard on her daughter for not completing her writing assignment."

"I had marked it incomplete and asked her to bring it home to her mother and have her initial it," she explained.

The child's mother reminded Ms. Reid that her daughter had trouble writing. "Exactly," Ms. Reid had replied. "That's why she needs to do these assignments, or she's not going to college."

That had happened on a Tuesday night. Ms. Reid and I talked about it the next night. That Sunday, I learned that Ms. Reid had resigned from the Harlem Success school over the weekend.

When I spoke to her a month later, she used the word "sustainable" a dozen times in explaining her sudden decision to me—as in, "This wasn't a sustainable life, in terms of my health and my marriage."

Ms. Reid is a truly gifted educator, and I often told her that I was impressed by how "on" she always was in class. She always replied, "You can never sit down." Now she had had to sit down.

The sprint-like pace that exhausted Ms. Reid is not uncommon among today's school reformers. Geoffrey Canada, the celebrated educator who runs the Harlem Children's Zone charter schools, often says that children's lives are being stunted by failing schools and we have to treat it as an emergency. We have to act now, urgently. Who wouldn't feel compelled to sprint?

Dave Levin is an extraordinary person. So is Jessica Reid. So are thousands of equally driven teachers in traditional public schools across the country. Their success has punctured the myth that social and cultural deficits prevent poor, minority children from excelling academically—an argument that is used by the teachers' unions to excuse systemic school failure.

But just as having superstar doctors in the emergency room is no substitute for fixing our health-care system, in the long struggle to improve American schools, these exemplary educators will lead us to the right place only if we can figure out a realistic way to motivate and enable the less-than-extraordinary teachers in the rank and file. They, too, need to respond to the emergency, but they won't do it if all that we give them is a choice between sprinting and sitting down.

The lesson that I draw from Ms. Reid's dropping out of the race at the Harlem Success school is that the teachers' unions have to be enlisted in the fight for reform. The unions are the organizational link that will enable school improvement to expand beyond the ability of extraordinary people to work extraordinary hours.

There are about 50 million students in America's 95,000 K–12 public schools. If just half of them need the kind of intensive care offered by the best charter schools, that would require overhauling classrooms for more than 25 times as many children as are now being served by the country's charter schools.

Scenes From a Classroom

Erin Patrice O'Brien for The Wall Street Journal

Jessica Reid eventually left the charter school where she taught.

Jessica Reid marched all 22 of her students out into the hall to look at the "Writing Up a Storm" bulletin board. These were displays of personal essays done under the tutelage of the teacher whom Ms. Reid, even while serving as an assistant principal, had just replaced.

"Look at it," she said. "What do you notice?"

"It's pretty empty," whispered one tiny girl in glasses.

"Yes, that's right, isn't it," Ms. Reid replied. "And think of the irony that it says 'writing up a storm.' Just seven out of 46 fifth-grade scholars have their essays up there, and some of them have grammatical mistakes and misspellings."

"The worst part," she added, "was that last week I said I would edit these for you if you asked, and in the entire grade, only two scholars asked for their work to be edited. That tells me you don't even care."

Several of the children shifted nervously on their feet. Most looked embarrassed. "Those of you who know me know that I am the most stubborn person you will ever meet," Ms. Reid concluded. "You're going to rewrite your paragraphs until they have correct capitalization and punctuation, because when you create a piece of writing that has errors you're sending the message that you're not intelligent. Why would you do that to yourself? I know you're intelligent."

Two weeks later there would be 44 pieces of nearly flawless writing on the board outside,

> and Ms. Reid had hung 3-D images of clouds from the ceiling above it (accompanied by pencils made to look like raindrops) because, she would tell her students, "you now really are writing up a storm."
>
> *—Steven Brill, from "Class Warfare"*

That cannot be done charter by charter; it takes the infrastructure of the public school system. And whether those schools are charter schools or traditional public schools, that means finding, training and motivating 1.5 million teachers and some 47,500 principals.

Mobilizing an army that large requires the kind of intense focus on minute-by-minute teaching practices that characterizes the best charters. But it also means creating work lives and career paths for teachers that will motivate a good portion of them to stay for a while. Capable teachers may not want to stay for decades, but they should stick around for at least five or 10 years.

If there is anything that I have learned from trying to figure out the problems of American public education, it's not just that teachers are toxic when they hang on for 20 or 30 years caring only about their tenure and their pensions. It's also that teachers get far better at what they do when they've been doing it for a few years. Working long, hard hours helps.

But it also takes preparation, training, lots of feedback and introspection, and high expectations to turn a hard worker into a great teacher. A handful may have the necessary skills and charisma on their first day in class. Most don't. It's a building process, and it requires time.

If they are pushed the right way, the unions can help to create educational systems that can enable and encourage ordinary teachers to work harder and more effectively—and still allow them to sit down once in a while so that they don't burn out.

If New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg really wanted to make his mark in education reform in his remaining years in office, he could try the ultimate Nixon-to-China play: He could make Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, his schools chancellor.

Ms. Weingarten is smart and almost certainly knows that the way to fix public education is to make the rank and file perform better. She knows exactly where and how to fix the union contract so that it rewards performance and enhances professionalism. She knows that the shelf life is rapidly expiring on her standard rope-a-dope dodge that she, too, wants to change lockstep teacher compensation and overprotective tenure rules, but that this can be done only if all sides collaborate to develop truly fair evaluation systems, which, her refrain goes, don't exist now.

I can see Ms. Weingarten now, standing with Bloomberg as she accepts the job. She would declare that times have changed; that we face a true crisis in educating America's next generation; that we have to move ahead with tough teacher evaluation systems even if the process isn't perfect, and even if management has to impose it the way management does in every other professional workplace; and that she's going to lead a new era of professionalism and accountability in teaching.

If a traditional Democrat appointed Ms. Weingarten as chancellor, it would be seen, correctly, as a big step back from reform. If Mr. Bloomberg appointed her—and relentlessly pushed her to complete a reform agenda—it would be seen as exactly the opposite.

My Weingarten-as-chancellor fantasy aside, the fact is that the unions and their leaders can and should be enlisted to help stand up those in the rank and file who are well motivated and able but not extraordinary. That doesn't mean yielding to the unions' narrow interests. It means continuing to bolster the new pro-reform political climate and, with it, the backbone of the political leaders who

negotiate with the unions.

Superstar teachers and great charter schools are saving thousands of young lives. But reaching into every American classroom means working with the unions—and persuading them to yield to the interests of the children their members are supposed to serve.

— Mr. Brill is the co-CEO of RR Donnelley's Press+, a service that enables publishers to charge for their online content, and the founder of the American Lawyer magazine and Court TV. His previous books include "The Teamsters" and "After: How America Confronted the September 12 Era."

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