

Fallacy of the Single Cause: A Response to America's Anti-Teacher Sentiments

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I remember only one moment from my year in a.m. kindergarten at Elm Creek Elementary, but I remember it distinctly: my class was sitting on the carpet in a floor circle, getting ready to play a game with colored blocks. Mrs. Brooks, my teacher, had her back to me and was helping a student on the other side of the circle, a whole 180° away. I needed her attention and shot my arm into the air. Mrs. Brooks didn't see my raised hand, so I went vocal: "*mom!* I have a question about the game!"

I swallowed my outburst and waited for the students to laugh, but they were too busy playing with sweater threads and flipping blocks to notice. Still, I was mortified. Mrs. Brooks moved her way over to me.

She smiled. She ignored the mistake, answered my question, and started the game. I guess students must have called her "mom" all the time.

I really loved my teachers. Like family, Freud would say.

Twenty-two years and a new haircut later, I became a high school English teacher. I did so for the reasons most teachers do: a chance to make a difference, a love of school and knowledge, the moments of clarity we find in ourselves and, more importantly, in our students.

My school-aged self had a ridiculous naiveté. Teachers were superior beings who knew all of the things. When I saw them at grocery stores, I hyperventilated. I had no idea they bought the same cereal brands as me. I had no idea they *existed* out of the classroom, let alone how much time they spent out of class grading or attending professional development.

I didn't go to school to be a teacher—I tried some other rough road first—but it wasn't until I became a teacher that I realized that while *I* was calling my teachers "mom" and putting

them on pedestals like perfectly sculpted Greek statues (although clothed), *the public* was looping ropes around their arms and pulling them down in the town square. I'd had no idea that public contempt was directed toward teachers. *Teachers?* Who could not like *teachers?*

My Panglossian innocence finally deflated, however, when I was three years into teaching, swept into the height of the "reform" movement. *Waiting for "Superman"*, the popular 2010 documentary about America's failing public schools, was in the forefront of my colleagues' minds and killing morale in its wake. The internet was exploding with criticisms and celebrations of the film. A lot of teachers and a lot of non-teachers had a lot to say, especially in the "comments" sections of education blogs. It was there, on the internet, that I found the voices of the public. And they *horrified* me. Comment after misspelled comment chided teachers for being lazy, worthless, glorified babysitters who complained too much and worked too little.

The public school system is not exempt from divide in our country. This is not new information. Philosophers and educators have been debating how American schools should be run—and how teachers should educate—since Horace Mann's implementation of public education in the mid-nineteenth century and the formation of the National Educator's Association in 1857.¹ This argument ebbs and flows throughout time: sometimes we're debating school start times, sometimes class size, sometimes the achievement gap, sometimes the adolescent brain, sometimes school violence.

The current issue headlining education is reform. The nascence of reform—starting with No Child Left Behind and steaming forth with Race to the Top—has instilled a new sense of fear in the American people. In 1983, the National

¹ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*, 184.

Commission on Excellence in Education published “A Nation at Risk,” an onslaught against “failing” American schools.² Thirty years later, Americans are still afraid. They are afraid we’re pumping money into a failed system. They are afraid their children are dumb. They are afraid other countries will become smarter and wealthier and stronger and that with all of those traits they will destroy us.

The voices of reform have inundated the general public with visions of a colorful educational utopia full of perfect test scores, academically satisfied children, technology-based classrooms, and college scholarships: what anyone would want for our schools. But, as all literature warns us, utopia is impossible—especially when expedited—and salesmanship of reform has come at a cost, no matter its good intentions. The faulty arguments and slippery rhetoric of reformers’ media coverage on testing, money, and schools tells us we’ve found the problem.

And the problem is teachers.

Kickin’ it Old School in the Common School

The reform movement runs on its appeal to nostalgia. Issues in education allure the public at large because we are interested in the socioeconomic impact of education and because we have children in the schools. But mostly, we care about school because we “get” school. Most of us had desks and bells. We all had teachers. The call of the reform movement that schools “aren’t as strong as they used to be” wakes the Wellesian child in us—Charlie Kane’s childhood sled in us is the smell of crayons, the rectangle pizza, the huddle during reading time—and we become afraid education today is losing its magic. That “back in my day” mentality represents the fear of change not only in our schools, but fear of change in every aspect our lives.

² The National Commission on Excellence in Education, “A Nation at Risk.”

But schools *aren’t* worse, in spite of what No Child Left Behind has reported. America is graduating more students in high school and college than ever before, mean scores on standardized tests are higher than previous years, and proficiency tests administered to elementary and middle school students have gone up for the last 20 years.³ In asking to rank their community schools, the majority of Americans gave theirs an A or B grade.⁴ (I will note, however, that fewer than 20% of Americans gave national schools higher than a B, which is inconsistent and possibly a product of media coverage). In her book *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America’s Public School*, educational scholar and professor (and outspoken anti-reform voice), Diane Ravitch argues the panic associated with reform is unwarranted and that the true issue in education is socioeconomic factors, which is a “national scandal” and that “reformers are misguided in their efforts to redress it.”⁵

It is imperative we always have goals to improve our public school system, and calls to action are necessary and admirable. But why—suddenly, and when schools are better or, at worse, the same—is everyone ready to jump in and save our students as though they’re drowning? It might be easier to look back—way back—to where it started, for some insight.

Since the appeal to tradition is such an important aspect of education, I’ll give you a brief lowdown of the Philosophers of Education line-up. These are the men and women who helped formulate America’s values in educating our children. If we’re appealing to nostalgia, it doesn’t get any older than these folks. *John Locke (1632-1704)*

English philosopher John Locke believed that teachers should observe “what [the student] is delighted at and encourage

³ Shyamalan, *I Got Schooled*.

⁴ Bushaw and Lopez, “The 45th Annual PDK/Gallop Poll,” 10.

⁵ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 4.

him to do it often.”⁶ Locke understood that students would not love their current passions if teachers forced them into deep, deep study of it.⁷ (In fact, he would suggest today that if students spent too much time on activities they loved, for example basketball, they should be forced to shoot hoops until they no longer had interest.) Locke believed that teachers were most responsible for not teaching every minute detail, but rather igniting the desire to continue education in the child.⁸ The teachers’ best qualities included “sobriety, temperance, tenderness, diligence, and discretion”⁹—a difficult argument to counter. While Locke did not teach masses of students—he only tutored—he clearly understood that every child is different and achieves greatness in unique ways. This was in the 17th century, which makes it much more impressive—and further emphasizes that humans have been publically trying to figure this out for a very long time.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)

French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau disagreed with John Locke’s *tabula rasa*, or “blank slate” theory that suggested humans were only shaped by experiences. Rousseau believed it was society that made man wicked, if man so happened to be, and this influenced many of his views on education. Rousseau wanted to keep the child innocent for as long as possible, to cultivate his passions, and to withhold adult influences, such as books, until a child would be mature enough to understand them rather than parrot the information.¹⁰ In his 1762 treatise *Emile*, Rousseau encourages what we, today, would call *zhen*—work, he believed, was destructive. Rather, humans should interact with the world. Rather, lessons should have real-

life application. Rather, children should fail, often, and learn in that failure.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)

As a founding father, Jefferson understood the importance of education as a way to maintain liberty and prevent tyranny. In his letters to friends and family, Jefferson spoke of his multiple ideas for education, and his “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” suggests a public institution that uses districts to determine where students will be educated.¹¹ In his 1817 plan, Jefferson suggests that for three years children be educated for free and that parents could pay for further education, including university. Two years later, he founded the University of Virginia as a secular school.¹²

Horace Mann (1796-1859)

Americans view Mann as the founder of public education. He believed it would be the “great equalizer” in our society and available for *all* (white) people. Essentially, Mann was the first major reformer; he visited Prussia and modeled the Massachusetts schools after what was working there; this common school was adopted by other states in the region. Teachers’ jobs were to present an engaging curriculum, he argued, but it was more important that common schools “create character.”¹³ Morality mattered more than smarts. And teachers’ smarts mattered. Horace Mann wanted strong teachers, and he wanted them paid well. His Normal Schools—schools that taught “the norms”—were schools that trained teachers on best practices but didn’t create robots out of them. In his Fourth Annual Report, he notes:

The statement has sometimes been made that it is the object of Normal Schools to subject all teachers to one

⁶ Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 128.

⁷ Ibid, 74.

⁸ Ibid, 195.

⁹ Ibid, 63.

¹⁰ Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*.

¹¹ Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 373.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Gibbon, *A Call to Heroism*, 32.

inflexible, immutable course of instruction. Nothing could be more erroneous, for one of the great objects is to give them a knowledge of modes, as various as the diversity of cases that arise—that like a skillful pilot, they may not only see the haven for which they are to steer, but know every bend in the channel that leads to it.¹⁴

Mann understood the balance needed for an effective classroom. In his First Annual Report, he states “teaching is the most difficult of the arts and the profoundest of all sciences.”¹⁵ Moreover, Mann was not quiet about his desire to include religion in his common school and put teachers in charge of this moral training. He felt Normal Schools would help educators understand that teaching was a “higher calling, a sort of sacred ministry, despite [the] modest status and pay.”¹⁶

Catharine Beecher (1800-1878)

Even before the early days of the normal and common schools, educators were mostly women and they were mostly single and they were mostly poor. Women were cheap labor. Catharine Beecher, a young teacher, had a mission of educating female teachers to high quality. While others looked down on teaching—considered it a profession only out of necessity—Beecher felt it should be considered a dignified mission.¹⁷

William James (1842-1910)

Many of William James’ insights in *Talks to Teachers* confirm what strong teachers intuitively know. He believes the science—psychology—of teaching and the art of teaching make it difficult to define. He notes: “the art of teaching grew up in the schoolroom, out of inventiveness and sympathetic concrete

observation.”¹⁸ James believes it is the job of the teacher to use that art to pull in “the mind of your own enemy, the pupil” as the student’s mind does whatever it can to work away from the lesson.¹⁹ In his talk, James concedes that, at times, habit and drill are necessary in the classroom but must be balanced with active learning; if William James loves anything, it is that organic, teachable moment.

John Dewey (1859-1952)

John Dewey might be the most controversial of the philosophers, but nonetheless his vision for education involves student motivation and teacher guidance. While Dewey believed education was meant to prepare children for the future, he argued that future was unknown: “[t]o prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself.”²⁰ Dewey tied education to home life and community life and believed the educational model should emulate the two—a theory that allowed much active, hands-on learning in the classroom, such as learning to sew. Likewise, Dewey emphasized the social aspect of education—group work, learning from others, school as training in socialization—as a balance to the psychology of the child. In this goal, he believed the teacher was responsible for not just training individuals, but in forming “proper social life.”²¹ Many mid-century scholars argue that the Progressive movement (of which Dewey was a champion), led to American lack of focus: that when schools were teaching hygiene, sports, and citizenship, they were losing focus on intellectual matter.²²

Maria Montessori (1870-1952)

Dr. Montessori’s method is still one of the most popular alternatives to education in both private and public Montessori

¹⁴ Mann, *The Republic and the School*, 48.

¹⁵ qtd.in Gibbon, *A Call to Heroism*, 33.

¹⁶ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*, 190.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 178.

¹⁸ James, *Talks to Teachers*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁰ Dewey, *On Education*, 429.

²¹ *Ibid*, 439.

²² Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism*, 359-368.

schools. She was not an educator, but a psychologist who studied children early on and tied brain development to socialization and curriculum.²³ Montessori schools take their model from Dewey: students are engaged in self-directed learning, play and socialization, and a teacher/mentor model where older students teach younger students once they have mastered the material. Oftentimes, Montessori classrooms will hold children of all grade levels—they will attend the same classroom with the same cohort for three years. The idea is that students all master different material at different times, rather than just according to their biological age.²⁴ Montessori believed that starting children young and letting them have an active role in their learning would encourage empowerment, and thus a natural desire to learn. Her theories counter the “school as factory” criticisms of traditional public schools today. It is evident that Dr. Montessori’s views on schooling contrast with the frequent testing of NCLB and Race to the Top; Montessori students are evaluated based on narratives that reveal their cultural literacy.²⁵

E.D. Hirsch (1928-)

In 1987, Hirsch wrote *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, which called for American students to have core knowledge and a common language. Hirsch believes that the achievement gap comes from a knowledge gap, which comes from a language gap.²⁶ His focus is on the notion of schema theory, in that students need the same foundation to start from before they can begin to construct and apply knowledge. *Cultural Literacy* contains a scientifically formed list of concepts that every student should know. Hirsch has been criticized for his “list” of common concepts, but he argues that these nuggets of knowledge are not meant to offer equal opportunity for all

²³ Lillard, *Montessori*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 328.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

²⁶ Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy*.

students. Much like William James, Hirsch sees a combination of rote memorization (learning isn’t always *fun*) and student-centered learning.²⁷

Howard Gardner (1943-)

Howard Gardner is known for his work with Multiple Intelligences (MI). He pulls from Hirsch’s ideas and faults his curriculum with too many facts and instead leans toward project-based learning.²⁸ Gardner believes there are three main different types of learners—intuitive, traditional, and disciplinary expert—each approach their education in differing ways.²⁹ Gardner suggests “students possess different minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways.”³⁰ His seven intelligences challenge the way institutions work, since schools assume uniformity in instruction and measurement. (The intelligences are: language, logical-mathematical analysis, visual or spatial representation, bodily/kinesthetic learning, musical thinking, interpersonal learning, and intrapersonal learning.³¹ Students can have intelligence profiles, which is like a Baskin Robbins sampling of academic personality.)

In sum: education has been passed from philosopher to philosopher—those above and many more. Some focus on what the teacher should be, some should focus on what the child should be, some focus on what the school should be. What they, of course, all have in common is that they care about the curiosity of child and the child’s role in the grand scheme of society. With the framework of these scholars, it is easier to understand how—and where—the reform movement lost its roots.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁸ Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind* 2, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 6,7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

³¹ *Ibid*, 12.

My School Can Beat Up Your School: Reform

As I noted earlier, Bush's No Child Left Behind (2002) and later Obama's Race to the Top (2009) have put the focus on hard core data. Test scores and numbers are the key measures of our schools' success rates. In the twentieth century, competition was sparked with the Space Race and Sputnik: America needed to be better than Russia. Still in the Cold War, the Reagan administration responded to "Nation at Risk," which on its first page opined, "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."³² Competition was rampant in 20th century America. The attitude was quite...American of us. We needed to establish and maintain ourselves as an economic global superpower. We needed the biggest guns, the biggest spaceships, and the biggest brains.

It would seem the logical way to reform education would tie back to the psychology of what we know about children and their learning patterns (we have taught math essentially the same way for a century—model in class, practice in class, assign the homework), yet reform movements in our country have been about changing the institution and accountability rather than focusing on "patterns of teaching and methods of pedagogy."³³ Traditional public schools have been run the same way for years, in spite of the fact that we know better; for example, research proves that students lose information over the summer and suffer when they must play catch-up at the beginning of the year, but nothing in the structure has changed.³⁴ Students learn better with stronger teachers, yet teacher training programs stay the same. The U.S. spends more money on athletes than math students, yet

³² The National Commission on Excellence in Education, "A Nation at Risk."

³³ Lillard, *Montessori*, 326.

³⁴ Canada, "Our Failing Schools."

we make no cultural adjustment for academic improvement.³⁵ Students learn better when they are able to form positive relationships with teachers, yet they are pulled from that adult and put with a new one, year after year. No one has yet attempted a true overhaul of the system where the entire institution is built from the bottom. Instead, we keep the framework and simply change the siding. I suppose to do otherwise might seem radical.

I find this tunnel-vision of reform perplexing. Those who have the money and power to "fix" education see it as a trickledown effect where *only* rules and regulation can improve the system—as though education is not working because there are simply not enough checks and balances. This approach hasn't had a drastic effect, (that is, reform isn't working right now), and it is time for a new idea. Maybe reevaluate from the bottom up. Or ask the *teachers* what to do.

Essentially, reform is me in college: when the "check engine" light comes on in its sedan, it fashions a tiny (expensive) piece of black tape to cover up the glow of the light—ignores it or speculates why it is there—rather than just checks the actual engine to find the core of the problem.

What is Reform?

The intention of reform is to level the playing field for students in low income areas by supporting charter schools (publically funded alternate options to the "neighborhood school") and to assess what that playing field is by holding teachers accountable for success in their classrooms; the measurement of "success in the classroom" comes with standardized testing.³⁶ Reformers desire to fix the system because as the U.S. has pumped more money into education, the academic outcome has remained the same. Reform is a spinoff of Bush's NCLB, which held schools accountable for low test scores

³⁵ Ripley, "The Case Against High School Sports."

³⁶ Ricciotti, "Education Reform."

by rewarding high-achieving schools and punishing low-achieving schools monetarily. NCLB helped to identify which schools were especially struggling. (Unfortunately, NCLB relies on a fallacy of circular reasoning in that it punishes poor-performing schools by withholding funds, when it is the poor-performing schools that need *more* money to increase performance—that is, it punishes poor schools for being poor.) The response to the NCLB-created chaos became Race to the Top, created by President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the \$4.3-billion program that advanced the charter school movement and judged teachers based on how students achieved in their classrooms.³⁷

Reform has been an expensive endeavor that has sliced a significant gap between teachers and the public as they fight over what education is supposed to be and why it is failing. (Again, the argument of failing schools may be a faulty premise; many critics believe schools are succeeding if we look at test scores and data.³⁸ Some believe that the failure of public schools is a façade put forth to the public and intended for political and economical gain.³⁹)

The commencement of reform took place in New Jersey, in 2009, with an alliance between Republican governor Chris Christie and Democratic mayor Cory Booker. Booker, a charter school advocate, wanted to make over New Jersey schools and needed Christie's support.⁴⁰ Booker believed, alongside other reformers, that if schools “recruit[ed] the best teachers [they] could overcome many of the effects of poverty, broken homes, and exposure to violence.”⁴¹ The partnership between Booker and Christie was important, since reform had begun as a right-wing conservative initiative and was now crossing party lines.

³⁷ Russakoff, “Schooled.”

³⁸ See Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 4.

³⁹ Berliner and Glass, *50 Myths and Lies*.

⁴⁰ Russakoff, “Schooled.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

In 2010, Mayor Booker's pitch to Governor Christie was a move to revamp New Jersey's failing schools from the top down. When Christie stamped the proposal, Booker began to sell his idea to men with money. Public funds had to be scrutinized, donations (or “investments”) did not. Quickly, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg donated a hundred million dollars toward the effort.⁴² The deal might as well have been made in a parking garage with trench coats and shadowed faces.

As the process went on, Zuckerberg's money did not go directly into the schools, but to “consulting firms with various specialties.”⁴³ Critics of the effort argued it was destined to fail because it neglected to take on poverty in the city; critics also stated charter schools were drawing for-profit agents into the public system.⁴⁴ Many teachers and administrators were fired in the process of the plan, and many students were caroused from school to school. In a convoluted network of time and misdirection, the end of the attempted Newark reform ended with an angry public, Zuckerberg's hundred million spent, and Booker and Christie invoking mum's the word.⁴⁵

The “face” of the reform movement is Michelle Rhee, former Washington, D.C. superintendent, who was featured in *Waiting for “Superman”*, the film responsible for bringing reform to the public. Rhee was a teacher with the Teach for America program, which requires just six weeks of training before placement in a classroom. She became an inner-city teacher in Baltimore for two years.⁴⁶ After teaching, Rhee started a group called New Teacher Project and consulted districts looking for reform in hiring policies; in 2007, Rhee was recommended by

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 4.

New York City chancellor Joe Klein to D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty, who appointed her the chancellor of Washington schools.⁴⁷

In a dodgy move of quintessential reform, Rhee dismissed over 50 principals and assistant principals and 300 teachers. After Mayor Fenty was defeated in primary in 2010, she resigned—in the face of a cheating scandal—and blamed teacher unions for any failure in Washington.⁴⁸ As the public face of reform, Rhee earned support for “cleaning up” the schools (a cover of *Time* featured her holding a giant broom), and she succeeded in vilifying teacher unions. Currently, she runs a lobby group called StudentsFirst. The purpose of the group is to fight against teacher tenure by supporting like-minded political candidates.⁴⁹ The rhetoric in the name—implying teachers *don’t* put students first—is a pathetic slur from someone who was not trained as a teacher and only spent two years in one classroom.

Reform exists on a system of “survival-of-the-fittest” competition: first, students contend for test scores; second, teachers try to win “merit” rewards (this naturally pits teacher against teacher on a bell curve model); third, schools fight for money with other schools in their district; fourth, school districts fight each other for money from the state; fifth, states compete against states to determine who will get federal funds.⁵⁰

Sounds simple.

Logical Flaws in Reform

The largest fallacy surrounding the reform movement is the business model approach to the public school system, which is a highlighted, triple-underlined faulty analogy. The reformers feel that accountability, numbers, data, and fear as motivation will

lead teachers to success—much like an insurance salesman will sell harder and earn commission to be rewarded with a trip to Fiji at the end of the fiscal year.

This isn’t how education works. Public education is its own entity, with its own rules, and its own experts. I have to find the irony of the business model and the timing of the reform movement darkly comical. While the banks were failing because of the lack of regulation, the schools were embracing these privatization models. (Not that privatization and choice are bad, but rather that they are seen as the immaculate fix to all of education’s ills.) Education is, generally, a socialist entity. The purpose is to provide knowledge and opportunity for all, and the government funds this prospect. Charter schools run on a lottery system, and only the elite can afford private schools, which has imposed capitalism on the structure. I’m trying to decide if this is a conspiracy to make all education privatized. I’m trying to decide if this push during the Obama administration is a severe anti-socialist response that he, himself, has bought in to, or simply happenstance.

As the popularity of the reform movement swelled and dominated the media, the public embraced this idea of business-model-for-schools. It was something they could *understand*. The idea of rewarding “good” behavior and punishing bad behavior seemed like a pragmatic, obvious solution to eliminating what the reformers said was the problem in schools—teachers—and increasing school success. Why should teachers have tenure to protect them from getting fired, when anyone in the real-world of employment could be let go at any time, for poor performance?

This business model faulty analogy is precisely where the reform movement missed its mark. Crucially, the public was misinformed from sources (namely *Waiting for “Superman”*, which somehow penetrated the public’s view of education in a propagandistic craze) that incorrectly defined teacher tenure and

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ravitch, “School Reform: A Failing Grade,” 33 and Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 4.

⁴⁹ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 4.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

pigeonholed teachers into an archetype of lazy, tired, freeloaders by portraying only the worst teachers they could find.

The slippery slope of “*Superman*” is the notion that fixing the teacher problem will fix all of the other problems in the school system. This film was ridiculously popular. It was reviewed in *Time* and *New York*, and Oprah covered it two times—one of the times with Mark Zuckerberg pledging his money to Newark schools.⁵¹ It set the public into a panic about a problem that they did not understand, or in straw man fashion, did not even exist. All attention was moved toward teachers and unions.

Teachers and unions are the scapegoat in “*Superman*,” and the nirvana fallacy of a solution is charter schools. The film argues that teachers are the reason students fail and charter schools offer the chance to hire and fire teachers whenever necessary, without the firewall of teacher unions in the way.⁵² The film never addresses the fact that many charter schools fail and some have egregiously misused and taken advantage of funds, and it fails to mention non-unionized charter schools offer no proof of better performance than unionized public schools. The film does not mention any achieving public school.⁵³

“*Superman*” promises quick results as though it is an infomercial for laundry detergent. Michelle Rhee wants “shock therapy” for schools rather than a detailed, schematic, layered solution.⁵⁴ The film caused a wave of response, and the public jumped right into the deep end of it. In the chaos of reform, it seems impossible for anyone to just dip their toes in to check the water temperature first.

Factors Beyond School

But the problem, Diane Ravitch argues, isn’t in the schools: it is within our country’s socioeconomic divides. When we look at numbers, it is not America’s *schools* that are failing, it is America’s *poor* that are failing. Reform makeovers are debunked the second reformers suggest that a great school can overcome socioeconomic gaps. It is a basic unwillingness to confront America’s poverty problem.⁵⁵ Economists side with reformers in that teachers have the highest input of student test scores *inside* of the classroom, but outside factors by far outweigh nonschool factors, most especially “family income.”⁵⁶ Students who grow up in affluent homes come to school having heard 30 *million* more words than students who grow up in poverty.⁵⁷ Even the most skilled teacher with a magic wand and a Mary Poppins bag full of cartoon penguins cannot pull off what reformers expect of the public schools. To pretend gaps in class don’t impact children is adolescent, arrogant, and dim-witted. To imply teachers are solely responsible for test scores “is tantamount to blaming a car salesman for Toyota’s accelerator problems.”⁵⁸ As Ravitch calmly argues, why not put money into both reducing poverty and improving schools rather than just investing in one and waiting not-so-patiently for it to fix the other?

Ravitch directly attacks Michelle Rhee’s policies. She criticizes what test scores are doing to the students in an ironic twist of “reform”: because schools become so obsessed with tests, programs such as art and music are being cut to make room for test prep.⁵⁹ She argues Rhee’s Washington schools only offered the appearance of reform and the changes resulted in

⁵¹ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools” and Russakoff, “Schooled.”

⁵² Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 7.

⁵³ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

⁵⁴ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 7.

⁵⁵ Bean, “We Blame Teachers.”

⁵⁶ Ravitch, “School Reform: A Failing Grade,” 33.

⁵⁷ Bergland, “Tackling the Vocabulary Gap.”

⁵⁸ Kelly, “Don’t Blame Teachers.”

⁵⁹ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of American Education,” 5.

cheating and easier curriculum.⁶⁰ (Cheating scandals have also been found in Pennsylvania, Baltimore, and Atlanta—a repulsive antithesis to education.) Schools are finding multiple ways to overcome the tight restrictions of reform, such as programs like “credit recovery” that allow students to make up failed courses with little equivalent work and watered-down retests.⁶¹

Thus, a fundamental flaw of reform is that it claims to be quantitative, but numbers can easily be manipulated. So what are the numbers for? Are they to help students to improve, or are they to present the façade that students *have* improved, while we still push them into the world unprepared, unconfident, and undertrained.

The *faultiest* of the faulty analogies of reform is the slew of non-educators parachuting in and acting as though they have any sort of experience, expertise, or value to the public school system. *Waiting for “Superman”* features no thriving teachers or school leaders.⁶² In a letter to Oprah following her support of the film, a teacher pleaded for her to “ask teachers and students—all of those voices are absent in the current national conversation.”⁶³ This same issue was apparent in the Booker/Christie alliance in New Jersey alongside their investors. Zuckerberg, in making his decision about the investment, was “disarmingly open about how little he knew about urban education.”⁶⁴ In *Waiting for “Superman”*, Michelle Rhee not only admits she knows very little about her job as a superintendent—she *brags* about the fact that she has been elected as a non-educator with no experience to come in and clean up the schools and will leave immediately after. It is condescending and humiliating to educators that they cannot

be trusted with their own field. (In 1858, a *Harper’s Weekly* article told readers: “teachers, too, are always the safest reformers...if they would combine and take hold of the heart of the American people, they could soon elevate the tone of education.”⁶⁵ Unfortunately, the issue went out of print before the reformers could get to it.) Joking aside, teachers have not only been totally ignored, they have been blamed and demoralized. Their voices have been silenced and all they can do is listen at the door while mommy and daddy are fighting about what to do next.

It is important, although difficult, to understand that many reformers did not go into this movement *planning* to muck up the entire system (but some of them may have, or some may argue that reform has been successful). Mayor Booker’s plan was to truly revitalize Newark based on an experience that worked for him. When Zuckerberg invested, it was out of a love for teachers and their worth: “[teachers are] going to have more of an impact than a lot of these other people who are going into jobs that are paying a lot more. And that’s kind of a basic economic inefficiency. Society should value these roles more.”⁶⁶ (The language of his argument slides quite nicely into an anti-reformer rationale for better-paid teachers.) Michelle Rhee actually has great respect and compassion for strong teachers, even if she doesn’t know how to assess them. Why else would she put so much stock in them to fix the system? Reformers and anti-reformers alike have great intentions in that they want opportunity for all children. The reformers have big hearts and a lot of money, but they are not educators. They can throw all the love and cash they want at education, but it does not put them in the classroom.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ravitch, “School Reform: A Failing Grade,” 35.

⁶² Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

⁶³ McCabe, “Educator’s Letter to Oprah.”

⁶⁴ Russakoff, “Schooled.”

⁶⁵ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*, 193.

⁶⁶ Russakoff, “Schooled.”

What is the Response to Reform?

The anti-reform group (which, in spite of its name is not “against change,” but against the radical, illogical ideas of reformers) believes the problem within schools includes “curriculum, facilities, and teacher recruitment and retention.”⁶⁷ They also name key factors outside of the school, such as socioeconomic class.

In their counterarguments, anti-reformers pull the rhetorical tactic of offering a reverse of the attack on unions and teachers. While this is strong argumentation, and while their ideas are valid and researched, their opposition implies an oversimplified solution that ignores the high complexity of the gears, nuts, belts, and bolts of the entire institution.

The first and most common anti-reform argument keeps the crosshairs on the teacher, but instead of attacking and blaming the teacher, reformers see her as a valued resource that must be nurtured and respected. Recently, America has been obsessed with Finland to the point of limerence. (In America’s bedroom, there is a poster of Finland tacked above its bed.) Finland has exponentially risen test scores and student success because of a substantial overhaul of their education system.⁶⁸ The Finnish model has been celebrated because of its respect for teachers and competitive teaching programs. In Finland and other successful countries, top candidates are recruited into teaching programs.⁶⁹ Finnish teachers must go through rigorous, difficult testing in order to earn teaching licensure, similar to that a doctor would go through for medical school. Teaching is revered with same respect as medicine. Teachers must write a 200 page thesis of original research and work with a mentor for up to three years before having their own classroom.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ravitch, “School Reform: A Failing Grade,” 32.

⁶⁸ Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World*.

⁶⁹ Eggers and Calegari, “The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries.”

⁷⁰ Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World*.

Americans do not appreciate their teachers as other countries do: 7% of teaching applicants are accepted into Helsinki’s teaching program, yet over 50% of applicants are accepted to Johns Hopkins’ and Columbia’s teaching programs.⁷¹ Finland is much more selective in who deserves the honor of *teacher*. Moreover, Finnish teachers are required to have Master’s degrees and must prove excellence in their field before applying to teacher programs. There is little need for evaluation in Finnish schools because they teachers are trusted with their craft. This attitude is an entire cultural shift and seems impossible from the depths of the reform movement.

In the United States, teachers come from the bottom-middle of their high school graduating class.⁷² The reason we’re not pulling in more prestigious candidates is because the profession offers no competitive wage. In high-achieving families, children can be chided for claiming they “just” want to be teachers. And our perception of teachers isn’t helping the matter much. The teaching profession is demeaned and mocked in our country. It can be difficult for teachers to establish authority and respect in the community when they are working the same summer jobs as their students.

We pay what we value.

Our model is this: a new college graduate is thrown into a difficult school, teaching five classes and 150 students a day. She’s had little support throughout the year.⁷³ She is frustrated and angry and lost. If her test scores are weak, she’s called a failing teacher.

Within the first five years of teaching, half of U.S. teachers quit; in urban schools, it is twenty percent a year.⁷⁴ This costs ridiculous amounts of money for human resources offices,

⁷¹ “By the Numbers,” 86.

⁷² National Commission on Excellence in Education, “Nation at Risk.”

⁷³ Eggers and Calegari, “The High Cost of Low Teacher Salaries.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

and it is clear the funds could be better allocated. (Finland puts its money into teacher training programs for better candidates rather than into retention after the fact.) Turnover in Finland is 2%. In South Korea, our other country crush, it's 1%.⁷⁵ In a McKinsey poll, American college students said they “would consider teaching if salaries started at \$65,000 and rose to a minimum of \$150,000,” a number that is competitive of careers that require the same experience.⁷⁶ (Some see this as an opportunity: within the next decade, half of our teachers will be eligible for retirement. How can we get the best recruits in?⁷⁷)

Another solution to the problem with teacher respect could be to invest more money into teacher professional development and mentoring programs to support new teachers. Teachers spend time on lunch duty and with mundane supervision, when they could be instead collaborating, designing lessons, or observing classrooms. Moreover, more time in the classroom does not mean more success (Finland spends 600 hours a year in the classroom, and the United States spends 1,100 hours)⁷⁸, and that time could be better used with colleagues.

Ironically, in *Waiting for “Superman,”* Guggenheim commemorates Finland’s system as a model for education. Finland’s teachers are unionized, they rarely give their students standardized tests, and they invest in teachers rather than in privatizing schools.⁷⁹ Moreover, Finland has “a national curriculum...that includes arts, sciences, history, foreign languages, and other subjects.”⁸⁰ In their process of reform, they fed money into social programs.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “By the Numbers,” 86.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Ibid.”

⁷⁹ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

To fly over to Finland and steal what is working for them would be a fantastic idea and a solid shout out to Horace Mann’s approach when he started our schools by borrowing from Prussia. Unfortunately, Finland is nothing like the states in terms of demographics and size. Finland is generally homogenous and has less poverty than the United States (5% of children there and 20% of children here).⁸² Finland is also the size of a U.S. state, not the entire country. There is no comparable model for the U.S. to follow, in terms of demographics and size. We cannot just steal the method of one country, and we cannot clone the United States and run a Fake States in an alternate universe. We are going to have to Frankenstein our own method by borrowing pieces of what has worked for everyone else.

A second important argument that applies to a “direct” fix within the schools is that of Early Childhood Education. Preschool offers the highest economic output for every dollar invested.⁸³

Young children are most susceptible to learning when they are young, and attempting to form their minds when they are older becomes difficult—it as though they are moldable clay when they are younger, and once they are older they harden and become more difficult to sculpt. Some argue it is the early years of life where students of varying socioeconomic status begin their gap in education.

While we in the midst of reform, it is worthy to note that a movement that ignores the obvious differences in children based on their upbringing “is unlikely to make much difference in overcoming the two major shortcomings of our K-12 education—the excellence gap and the fairness gap.”⁸⁴ Early childhood education may be the way to bridge that gap.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Heckman, “Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children.”

⁸⁴ Hirsch, *The Knowledge Deficit*, 227.

If we model Finland for the teacher model, we might model France for the ECE model. The French minister of education argues French preschools are considered the “crown jewel” of the education system.⁸⁵ France is the size of Texas (which makes comparison with the U.S. faulty) and it runs on a national-level rather than a state-level curriculum. Schooling begins at age two and daily lessons are part of the assigned curriculum; however, teachers are allowed autonomy in the classroom.⁸⁶ It is also interesting to note, that like Finland, teaching jobs in France are quite competitive; teachers are required to have a bachelor’s degree in another discipline before perusing education and will complete course work over years and months of on-the-job experience with a mentor. French preschool teachers are required to have the same certification as any other teachers in the country.⁸⁷ American preschool teachers are paid very little.

In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama pledged over one billion dollars toward the ECE cause.⁸⁸ These early childhood programs advocate for preschool for all students, no matter income level. The Department of Education plans to allocate money to states based on their numbers of young children and then the states will distribute to school districts.⁸⁹ It is difficult to find an educator who would disagree with offering more opportunities of education to young children; however, opponents to the bill argue that in the past, even with money, the U.S. has struggled to produce “high-quality” programs. It is dangerous and foolish to simply throw money at the problem.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Hurless, *Early Childhood Education*, 1.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸⁸ The White House, “Early Childhood.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Zimmer, “Don’t Throw Money.”

In short, there is no quick and dirty answer from either side. Anti-reformers still must be careful not to fall in the trap of a immaculate solution to fix our schools. No type of reform can be a controlled experiment. When programs work, there are many complex layers to figure out why they succeed, just as there is a danger in a post hoc ergo propter hoc argument about why our schools are failing. Unless we perform an educational experiment in a vacuum (of Fake States can be a thing), we will always have to consider these layers.

Teacher Trust: “I Pay Your Salary!”

Reformers like to pretend that there was once a golden age of a perfect school system where teachers and students were faultless and everyone rode unicorns to school while practicing multiplication tables as they passed under rainbows.

But, it turns out, the public has always hated teachers.

The NEA’s first ten years involved spending a significant amount of time proving that teaching was a profession in and of itself.⁹¹ This required proving teachers and administrators had skills that nobody else had.⁹²

Theory evolved at the beginning of the profession as a way of distinguishing teachers from people who devalued the profession. The divide with the public became worse as lessons in school were converse of what families expected.⁹³ Teachers in the late 19th century were under attack from opponents who claimed there were stronger alternatives to public schools, (...*sounds familiar*), and the main function of the NEA was to “offer protection against demands for reform from *outside the profession*”⁹⁴ (emphasis mine). Parents and tax-payers often felt they had the

⁹¹ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*, 194.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 195.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 196.

right to intervene since the teachers were under centralized control.⁹⁵

Because teachers fought this entity early on, and because they saw teaching as a calling as well as a profession, they felt united in their push for autonomy. Teachers had experience and training, which gave them “legitimate authority” to resist the invasion of parents and public: “in this view, only the teacher... understand[s] what is truly in the best interest of children.”⁹⁶

The separation between teachers and the public crosses interesting lines. The divides do not exist on a left/right spectrum—both Republican and Democratic teachers align vs. both a Republican and Democratic public; and if the right/left divide was clearer across the two, it could be a “very placid scene.”⁹⁷

What the Public Says

Many of the reformers considered it a “win” when, in June 2014, a California judge made a ruling that the tenure law in California was unconstitutional because it deprived poor and minority children of the best possible education.⁹⁸ The tenure case was financed and brought to court by a non-education entity—a Silicon Valley entrepreneur named David Welch, who called his movement Students Matter (a sly piece of rhetoric that assumes teachers don’t believe “students matter”). The judge who ruled on the case argued “California’s laws make it impossible to get rid of the system’s numerous low-performing and incompetent teachers,” that seniority was harmful, and that granting tenure to teachers after two years was “farcical.”⁹⁹ The

other argument of striking tenure was because “least effective teachers are disproportionately assigned to schools filled with low-income and minority students,” which violated those student’s rights to equal treatment.¹⁰⁰ Education Secretary Arne Duncan supported the ruling.

Teachers and anti-reformers, however, consider the decision a big loss for both students and teachers. While many concede that the California system needed to be re-evaluated, now many competent, effective teachers are at risk for undue process if they are terminated.¹⁰¹ The California Federation of Teachers president responded: “We believe the judge fell victim to the antiunion, anti-teacher rhetoric and one of American’s finest corporate law firms that set out to scapegoat teachers for the real problems that exist in public education.”¹⁰² In the eyes of the teachers, the ruling presents the illusion of helping students when it is instead drilling a hole into the bottom of the education boat. Moreover, the notion of alluring strong candidates to teaching to replace these “poor teachers,” becomes more and more unlikely as the profession is vilified.¹⁰³

The average teacher is quite unlike the average adult: teachers are more educated, make more money, and are disproportionately white. At least 73% of them are women.¹⁰⁴ Teachers have much more confidence in public schools than the average person does.

The divides with public and teachers are clearly aligned with reform, which is why this movement has caused such an uprising. Polls suggest:

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Peterson, Henderson, and West, *Teachers vs. The Public*, 38-39.

⁹⁸ Medina, “California Judge Rules.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Flannery, “Wrong Call.”

¹⁰⁴ Peterson, Henderson, and West, *Teachers vs. the Public*, 96.

- 66% of the public thinks teachers should demonstrate success before getting tenure (29% of teachers say the same);
- 72% of the public says tenure should be fully eliminated (35% of teachers);
- 48% of the public “completely or somewhat favor” increase in teacher salary (80% of teachers);
- 26% of the public “somewhat or completely oppose” increase in teacher salary (2% of teachers)¹⁰⁵

Other public opinion comments on the teacher’s unwillingness to be observed in the classroom or to change/modify with changing times. Some argue that the “soft evaluations” of teachers make it impossible to see where students need improvement.¹⁰⁶ Teachers, sometimes believe they can rely on their own personal observations about the success of their class and can be reluctant to invite outsiders in—or assume without quantitative data that the classroom is running smoothly.¹⁰⁷

Explanation for the public view of tenure may come from *Waiting for “Superman”*. (The survey was taken three years after the release of the film.) Statistics from the film note that only “one out of a thousand” tenured teachers is let go.¹⁰⁸ This information, compared to “one of every 57 doctors losing his license,” and “one out of every 97 lawyers losing license to practice law,” is quite shocking.¹⁰⁹ The perception is that teachers are hiding behind their unions and thus unwilling to engage in any discourse about changes to their jobs. The union is strong-armed, and in the public’s eye, is standing up for teachers while leaving students

¹⁰⁵ for all survey results, see Peterson, Henderson, and West, *Teachers vs. the Public*.

¹⁰⁶ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*, 198.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ *Waiting for “Superman,”* dir. by Guggenheim.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

behind. Part of the rhetoric of reform is the comparison to business, and as such, statistics like “firing 5% of poor teachers will fix the problem”¹¹⁰ can seem logical and appealing to an outside group.

The public also has responded to recent online resignation letters, which pull the attention to working conditions in the field. While some are sympathetic with these letters, others argue teachers who publically resign were “never good teachers anyway” or would “teach regardless of pay if they really loved it.”¹¹¹ The attitude toward teachers is that they are putting themselves on the pedestal.

Other interesting notes from the 45th Gallup Poll (2013) show that “fewer than one in four Americans said increase in testing has helped improve public schools,” that “70% of the public has trust in our teachers,” and the biggest problems facing our schools are “lack of parental support, difficulties in getting good teachers, and testing requirements and regulations.”¹¹²

The data is mixed and the opinions vary. Nonetheless, the chasm between teachers and public stems from the misunderstanding of educational culture, which I will (attempt to) explain below.

What the Teachers Say

Teachers are mixed as much as the public is on what will best fix our public schools. The current response from them is on the defensive, given the harsh attacks of reform.

Teachers and the public especially divide on test score accountability, tenure and unions, and effective evaluations.

Test Score Accountability

On the surface, using test scores to determine whether a teacher has been successful seems like a clear cut idea that would

¹¹⁰ Rotherham, “Blame Game: Let’s Talk Honestly about Bad Teachers.”

¹¹¹ Payne, “Why Do Teachers Complain So Much.”

¹¹² Bushaw and Lopez, “The 45th Annual PDK Gallup Poll,” 9-22.

make awarding and denying tenure a simple algorithm. Unfortunately, teachers are not lone factors in student test scores, and on average count for only “7.5-10% of student test score gains.”¹¹³ Outside factors such as poverty and home life are much stronger influences on a student’s success; therefore, tests measure *who* a teacher instructs, not how well he or she has taught the class.¹¹⁴ Test-score accountability is terrifying for teachers, and it may unfairly cut strong teachers simply based on the numbers. When Michelle Rhee was running Washington’s schools, “teacher’s pay, their jobs, even the survival of their schools, could depend on a couple of years of test scores.”¹¹⁵

Evaluation and numbers don’t always assess, accurately, what makes a good teacher. If a system only uses numbers, teachers with the neediest students will show weaker test scores.¹¹⁶ (As a result, strong teachers will have even more incentive to avoid the schools that need them, which is the problem we have in the first place.) In business, competition can work as a motivating factor. In education, numbers encourage competition between teachers when they should be collaborating to do what is in the best interests for students: competition alienates teachers from their colleagues in an already isolated profession.¹¹⁷

The argument is the same for merit pay. Teachers do not have to work on a bell curve. There do not have to be “good teachers” and “bad teachers” if they are collaborating for the greater effort. As I noted earlier, test score accountability also increases cheating.

¹¹³ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Delbanco, “The Two Faces of Education,” 5.

¹¹⁶ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

¹¹⁷ Walker, “The Top Five Myths.”

Tenure, Unions, and Evaluation

There are a number of reasons, from the teachers’ perspectives, to have due process in the profession. The largest issue with the fight over tenure/unionization and the public is the definition of what *tenure* is. Tenure simply means “due process.”¹¹⁸ Tenure does not promise that teachers will be employed for life or that they will have constant financial security; tenure is not simply given because one has completed three years in the classroom, it is an accolade which is earned.¹¹⁹ Like any sector, education must protect its employees from unwarranted accusations or personality conflicts that could lead to termination without justification. In the teaching profession, due process could protect a teacher who for ethical reasons refuses to change a student’s grade from a C to an A in spite of an administrator’s orders. Due process protects the science teacher who knows schools must teach evolution even though the community pushes her not to do so.¹²⁰

Throughout the debate, tenure has been used as a red herring that has diverted the true issues in our schools. *Waiting for “Superman”* exemplified this when the film showed the “rubber room,” a New York schools catch-all for teachers who would sit and collect pay while the school system waited to fire them. (The rubber rooms no longer exist.) Anyone who saw the rubber rooms would be outraged. They were an inconceivable abuse of public funds. And they were a perfect symbol of the remaining issues in retaining strong teachers.

But they did not represent the tenure system as a whole. They represented one district that had poorly constructed its teacher contract. Unfortunately, since “*Superman*” was so popular, these rubber rooms were what came to mind when anyone outside of education was discussing tenure.

¹¹⁸ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

¹¹⁹ Hart, “What Teacher Tenure Is.”

¹²⁰ Berliner and Glass, *50 Myths and Lies*.

The quick-fix fallacy in “*Superman*” suggests that if public schools fire bad teachers, they will become successful, but the film fails to explain how difficult it is to point-out bad teachers.¹²¹ Much to the viewing audience’s disbelief, bad teachers don’t walk around wearing dunce caps.

In her *Atlantic* article “What Makes a Great Teacher,” journalist Amanda Ripley studies teachers operating under the assumption that we “have never identified excellent teachers in any reliable, objective way.”¹²² She notes that the great teacher is a “hero, but never a lesson.”¹²³ Ripley discovers a number of patterns that show up in strong teachers: first, they set large objectives for their classes; second, they constantly search for ways to develop their effectiveness—never settling for one “working” method; next, they overwhelmingly reevaluate what they are doing.¹²⁴ Furthermore, exceedingly strong teachers ask students and their families to help with the planning process, “plan exhaustively and purposefully—for the next day or year ahead—by working backward,” and try to assure every lesson can land with each student, in spite of his or her outside life.¹²⁵

I’ll explain it like this: there is a particular light to teachers, a subtle spark that only students can see—sometimes colleagues. A story of my 9th grade English teacher serves as a metaphor: she told us a story that one night, while she was sleeping with the window open during a storm, she was struck by lightning through the window. She said the next morning she’d felt fuzzy and confused, and looking back, I have to wonder if I’m remembering the story clearly. But all that matters is that the rest of the time I was in her classroom, I felt electricity coming from her. I have to wonder where that artistry comes from (did

she just have it, or did she learn it? Was it the lightning?) or if teacher empathy can be measured. She was only in my school for two years, so perhaps they tried to measure it and failed.

In a previous district where I was employed, a remarkable teacher was driven out because he was known to be the “tough” senior teacher who was “preventing” students from graduating. Parents were concerned about students having a “B” on their transcript and staining an otherwise perfect GPA, so they gathered and complained. The administration responded by making this teacher’s life very difficult with manipulative strategies that led him to early retirement. Never mind that this man had an incredible kind of magic and passion in his classroom—he was frequently voted to speak at the senior breakfast, and after he had gone, a colleague told me he once paid for a student to send her daughter to daycare so she could graduate high school on time. The student paid him back. The administration, the parents, the other students, had no idea.

In spite of my bathetic anecdote here, I feel I should reiterate the point that compassion cannot be measured, yet it does lead to student success, whether or not that “success” shows up on a test.

One added difficulty for the teacher is a potential for student or parent abuse of power. Without the protection of tenure, a student or parent could make an unfounded accusation against a teacher for any reason and end her career. Luckily, most families support their teachers, but it is a legitimate fear that a teacher could be threatened with her career for not manipulating a grade or for simply assigning a fair one.

I believe reformers know teaching is an art as well as a science. They know that it takes a skillful teacher to translate curriculum to lessons. Unfortunately, what seems unclear to them is that this artistry can disappear when “test panic” sets in and scores are all that matters. The drill and kill method becomes default.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ripley, “What Makes a Good Teacher?”, 60.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 62.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 62, 63.

The argument here is not that evaluations should be eliminated or that teachers should not be held accountable: the argument here is that there must be a reliable, sturdy method of doing so that goes far beyond simple test scores that measure *student* success and not necessarily teacher success. It most certainly should not be designed by a non-educator. (Chillingly, there have been movements to push more non-educators to head schools and evaluate teachers; the idea is that someone in the military but with no experience in education could whip the model into shape.¹²⁶) A method of evaluation should include student scores and an assessment of a teacher's written lessons. Evaluations should be made frequently to both probationary and tenured teachers by *qualified* experts who have been in classrooms—perhaps veteran teachers alongside academically experienced administrators. Each aspect of the evaluation should be made with the understanding and appreciation of the many strings teachers must pull to create the full allure of the puppet show.

If the movement of “business model” continues to steamroll through the reform movement, teachers are not only worried about being terminated over misevaluation of their performance or from faulty accusations, but about losing employment because of business-like downsizing. If a strong teacher is not protected by tenure, what prevents a district from eliminating her position, which “costs” more because of her education and experience, and replacing her with a direct-from-college teacher who “costs” less money?

During the recession, this was common practice by employers to save money, and many qualified employees were ousted and struggled to find work because they were over-experienced. (Yes, the counterargument is clear: if everyone else

has to deal with this, then so do teachers, but I deflect to my rationale above.)

This is already the method of small districts: when I was first looking for a job, many districts refused to interview me because I had a Master's degree and was therefore “too expensive.” Even larger districts are adapting this practice and will refuse to interview any teachers with advanced degrees, let alone any experience in the classroom.

There are two ironies here: one, that in the *field* of education, education is devalued and not considered important for success; and two, that reform argues we need better teachers in the classroom and tenure prevents that from happening—but if we lost tenure, we would lose those qualified teachers to save costs.

Another argument for tenure/due process is the notion of the entrepreneurial teacher, the one who gets results by bringing creativity and innovation to the classroom. While it seems these teachers are the ones we remember and the ones who often have highest results, these same teachers can tend to stir things up in the politics of the school. Principals can be afraid of them, and their ideas involve taking a risk and trying and failing with multiple strategies before finding one that sticks (and then revising it, because that is what good teachers do). These teachers are often intelligent and they “have ideas” and verbalize those ideas in a way that may threaten their superiors. Their voice is one that fights for the learner, and in doing so, can come across as anti-establishment. These also are the teachers who are diminishing—the more the teaching profession is devalued, the more these entrepreneurs enter the professions that pay more money and reward rather than punish them for their ingenuity.

It is crucial to argue (that in spite of what the reformers say about unions) that good teachers don't want bad teachers to keep their jobs. These bad teachers have somehow become the poster children of the reform movement and just this small group

¹²⁶ Ravitch, “The Myth of Charter Schools.”

is tainting the entire population. Education has an odd phenomenon where teachers are judged by only the bottom 5% of the group.¹²⁷

No logical reason exists to keep poor teachers in the system, even from the eyes of other teachers; it goes against the entire institution of education. Teachers want strong colleagues who will help them better their own practice. A 2003 Public Agenda poll reported that 78% of teachers stated “few (or more) teachers in their schools ‘fail to do a good job and are simply going through the motions.’”¹²⁸ Many teachers can name someone they have worked with who struggled with the workload, lost her passion, lost her artistry. Sometimes these teachers don’t know they don’t belong in the classroom (or they don’t care), and sometimes these teachers are aware of their shortcomings. Where the fallacy exists: reformers have blown this number out of control and made all educators the scapegoat. The two teachers shown sleeping in *Waiting for “Superman”* somehow came to represent the norm, when it is, in fact, a very low number of teachers who are not succeeding—and if they are failing, they are denied tenure or they are fired. This small percentage of teachers is hurting the strong teachers who have come to fear they will be misidentified as low performing teachers. At many schools, this has killed morale.

Dear Everyone: I Quit!

One of the biggest problems facing education is the lack of teacher retention. Nearly half a million educators “move or leave the profession each year...which means 15% of the workforce is leaving or moving every year.”¹²⁹

Shockingly, it was nearly the same statistic 150 years ago: “In 1859, the average teaching career lasted less than two years,

¹²⁷ “Why is it That America Hates Teachers So Much?”

¹²⁸ “Protecting Bad Teachers.”

¹²⁹ Seidel, “The Teacher Dropout Crisis.”

and very few continued to teach for more than five years.”¹³⁰

“Nation at Risk” identified similar issues with teacher retention. It noted: “the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields.”¹³¹

As reform and standards press on, teachers are feeling the value of their careers sink under the weight of politics. In a move that inspired many more, a New York history teacher, Jerry Conti, published his resignation letter to Facebook (alongside a picture of Porky Pig saying “that’s all folks!), which was later picked up by the *Syracuse Standard* and made viral in April 2013.¹³² Conti’s letter earned sympathy from other teachers, students, and the public. In his letter, he declares his issues are with the demands of testing and the sterilization of education: “creativity, academic freedom, autonomy, experimentation, and innovation are being stifled in a misguided effort to fix what is not broken in our system.” Conti’s letter ends powerfully: “for the last decade or two, I have had two signs in my room that read ‘words matter’ and ‘ideas matter’. While I still believe these simple statements to be true, I don’t feel those currently driving public education have any inkling of what they mean.”¹³³

Nearly a year later, Susan Sluyter, a kindergarten teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts published her resignation letter with *The Washington Post*. Sluyter argues that her job has been reduced to “testing, data collection, competition, and punishment.”¹³⁴ She channels the early educators when she pleads that all experts argue young children learn through playing and that tests are hindering their success in the classroom. She closes her letter with a lament for the loss of the teaching profession: “I felt my

¹³⁰ Glenn, *The American Model of State and School*.

¹³¹ The National Commission for Excellence in Education, “Nation at Risk.”

¹³² Kingkade, “Teacher Resignation Letter.”

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Strauss, “Kindergarten Teacher.”

spirit, my passion as a teacher, slip away. I did not feel I was leaving my job. I felt then and now that my job left me.”¹³⁵

These letters have inspired many more, including an English teacher who argued through *Huffington Post* that testing has caused “a decline in student morale” and that students are “giving up on their lives already.”¹³⁶ This teacher highlights a flaw in the system: “if we speak out, we are reprimanded for not being team players; if we do as we are told, we are supporting a broken system.”¹³⁷ Another teacher argues through *Huffington Post*, “I quit teaching because I was tired of feeling powerless.”¹³⁸ A young teacher, he leaves with a sense of optimism for himself, but a sadness and fear for the state of education.¹³⁹

The phenomenon of the “public resignation” is an interesting rhetorical strategy on the part of teachers who feel overwhelmed and devalued by reform. Why are these teachers posting their resignations to the entire world? It seems as though they are desperate for some sort of interaction. The role of the teacher is isolated and private. With public letters, teachers are reaching out to find allies that are otherwise hidden while they are in the trenches. These teachers need affirmation that a strong fight exists—somewhere—for their students. The letters also offer a softer side of the media’s vilified teacher. These teachers are not tenure-driven, lazy slugs. Their letters celebrate young minds. Their public resignation is a way of reminding the public that everyone is on the same side and it is on the side of the child. (Unfortunately, a lot of people posted anti-teacher arguments and criticized the letters, which led to many pro-reform/anti-reform comment-section-internet-wars.)

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Hawkins, “Why I’m Resigning.”

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Edgerton, “Why I Quit Teaching.”

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Another argument for the public letter could be that Conti and Sluyter were close in their careers to retirement. Perhaps they saw themselves as martyrs for the cause of younger teachers, sacrificing themselves early for the sake of the entire profession.

Educational scholar William James said: “The worst thing that can happen to a good teacher is to get a bad conscience about her profession...Our teachers are overworked already. Everyone who adds a jot or tittle of unnecessary weight to their burden is a foe to education.”¹⁴⁰ Optimistically, there is some light and some aligning of teacher and public relations. Americans are aware that the perception of teachers does not mimic what is happening in the classroom: 68% of Americans believe news coverage of teaching and education is quite negative.¹⁴¹ Moreover, many Americans would encourage someone they considered highly intelligent to go into the teaching.¹⁴² Seven out of 10 Americans would like for their child to be a public school teacher—which is the highest response in three decades.¹⁴³

Just as much as there are naysayers blaming teachers for the failure of our students, there are non-teachers standing up for the profession in kind and lovely ways. In a response to the teacher resignation letters, one teacher advocate posted an open letter to public school teachers apologizing on the behalf of the public. She argues, “your profession has been vilified, scapegoated, mined for profit, and de-professionalized...we speak out and stand with you.”¹⁴⁴

The perception of teachers is changing on the daily, and the fact that teachers are so powerfully speaking up substantiates

¹⁴⁰ James, *Talks to Teachers*, 6.

¹⁴¹ Hawkins, “Americans Adore Teachers.”

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Long, “Public Supports High Pay for Teachers.”

¹⁴⁴ Weill-Greenberg, “An Open Letter to Public School Teachers.”

their commitment to the career. While this cross-section of the reform movement feels overwhelming and bleak, the reformers and anti-reformers both need to recognize the incredible amount of success students and teachers find in their schools. I'm upset that it is hard to believe there are teachers who go to work each morning happy, excited to work with children and their families, anxious and eager to see if the students will like the lessons for the day. I'm lucky enough to be one of those teachers, and I work in a school that embraces this optimism. This culture makes a difference.

In our nation, in our states, in our districts, and in our schools, we will keep working at education. We will always keep working at education.

Now, What Did We Learn?

Reform uses teachers as a scapegoat. It is a fallacy of the single cause. It is as though America is afraid of the institution of education itself. We're begging for answers, and they're not posted on Sparknotes.

Rather than moving in a new direction, we're moving from reform to reform as though we're throwing our rock on the next hopscotch square and lumbering our way through. If we want to make schools better, there has to be another way than starting from the top, or there must be some value in recalling the reasons we care about education in the first place—not competition and not numbers—but back to the psychologists and the philosophers. Currently, the reformers are using tests as a weapon. We've lost the notion of learning for learning's sake. We're intimidating schools and students with numbers. The numbers and hard data of the reform movement do not align with how students learn. Numbers force students to compete; they either lessen a low-performing student's self-worth, or teach a high-performing student that she is measured only by a grade. They push teachers to lecture to the test rather than follow

proven theories about the development of a child or the temperance of a teenager. When are we working with human nature, and when are we working against it? Of course, we need *some* numbers—we must measure success in multiple ways, and it would be futile we think we shouldn't. It's just that, right now, we're using the wrong numbers. (Oh, but there are so many to choose from!)

Where to? Well, if we look back to the “founders” and philosophers of education, we find a rather substantial chasm between their ideas and the false piety of reform.

Firstly, the philosophers were more interested in ideas and child development rather than competition and test scores.

Secondly, the philosophers were speculating about education and offering ideas, rather than pushing perfect solutions (except for maybe Horace Mann); the reformers proposed they'd found the Holy Grail to fixing our schools and that it was by cutting poor teachers and eliminating unions.

Thirdly, the philosophers celebrate the art of teaching and its *contributions* to student success, and the reformers are interested in the hard data of teaching and the *measurement* of student success.

Next, the reformers are all business-minded non-educators. And...well, most of the philosophers were non-educators as well. Few of them had taught in K-12 schools, or had attempted to teach in K-12 schools and failed. This is fascinating: even from the beginning, nobody was asking the educators, the soldiers, the true experts in battle, what was best for students. In my arrogance, I believe it was envy: the philosophers and reformers were simply failed teachers who felt guilty about not being able to handle the pressures and rewards of the classroom. (Freud would love this.) Nonetheless, the one common factor between the philosophers and the reformers is the most important: they all, we all, want success for our children.

I'd like to think that any American, reformer, anti-reformer, hybrid, or teacher, would realize that founding father Thomas Jefferson (in spite of his controversial shortcomings) could help us find education's role in this "grand experiment," so I'll offer some of his musings on knowledge to humble our giant egos:

Humbling thought #1: "Reason, not rashness, is the only means of bringing our fellow citizens to their true minds."¹⁴⁵ All sides of this debate have either argued rashly—the reformers offensively and the anti-reformers defensively—and have appeared to gather evidence and statistics like candy from a busted-open piñata rather than apply reason and logic to the actual implementation of ideas. It has become an internet war, but the internet is a glass that can never be filled. That thing is huge.

Humbling thought #2: "The moment a person forms a theory, his imagination sees in every object only the tracts which favor that theory."¹⁴⁶ The problem is confirmation bias. We all believe we are seeking the Truth, or that there is just one policy that will lead us to Shangri-La. As with any strong political strategy, each side must abandon groupthink.

This mentality is difficult. I can't even say I've achieved it myself.

Last year at my high school, students gathered after classes the Friday before Teacher Appreciation Week and Crayolaed colorful posters to hang around the building for the rest of the year. They were adorable. When teachers walked into school after a long night of grading papers, there would be a bright reminder of inspiration to pull them through the morning. When teachers used the staff bathroom during lunch, there,

across from the toilet would be a bit of wisdom to get them through the afternoon. (And then home, to grade more papers.)

The one sign that stuck with me, though, was the 8½ x 11 sheet of paper in the copy room, posted directly above the copier. In neon-pink block letters it read: "To the world you're just a teacher, but to us, you're a hero!" For all of May, when I went to photocopy worksheets, those pink letters struck an awful and beautiful chord of cognitive dissonance in me. *Just* a teacher. *A hero*. These two conflicting ideas in the same sentence summarize the entire aura of this profession. Although this poster was composed in a perfect bout of innocence, this student was exactly right. She nailed it. Someone must have taught her well.

¹⁴⁵ Jefferson, *The Words of Thomas Jefferson*, 94.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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