

EDUCATION MATTERS

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By Rick Hess

End the Education Wars

Teachers and reformers can get out of the trenches by realizing they both have a solid case.

Casual observers can be forgiven for wondering why the push to improve America's schools looks like a World War I battlefield. Reform advocates blast schools as failing and call for a raft of remedies, from teacher evaluation to charter schooling. Some teachers react defensively, condemning these proposals as an attack on schooling and their profession.

Who's right? Why do advocates and educators seem so deeply divided? Can anything be done to get us on a more fruitful path?

First, it's vital to recognize that both sides are right but are looking at things from different vantage points. If you're focusing on educational outcomes, the results can be disheartening. In 2013, only 42 percent of the nation's fourth graders were deemed proficient in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and just 35 percent were proficient in reading. Eighth graders fare worse. And low-income, black, and Latino children do worse than that.

Yet, these figures are incomplete. Reading and math scores have been steadily improving in the U.S. for

two decades. Parents have mostly good things to say about their own schools, with about 70 percent consistently saying they'd give their oldest child's school an "A" or a "B." And teachers can be responsible professionals and still struggle to overcome the forces of poverty, family fragmentation, and neighborhood dysfunction.

Reformers see schools as a means towards a larger agenda of social betterment. They're less concerned with the social fabric of schools or what educators think they can be fairly asked to do than with the measur-

able results. If they have to break a few eggs along the way, so be it. The most vocal reformers hurl blame and aren't worried about whether their language or policies are fair to individual educators.

Educators, on the other hand, spend their days in schools. They take pride in their work. Most think they're doing their best, and that their best is pretty good. They have a sense of what they believe schools can and can't do, and are sensitive to the problems proposed by reformers, who they think are seeking to scapegoat them for society's failings. The most vocal teachers lash out, accuse reformers of mounting a "war" on public education. This then reaffirms reformers' conviction that teachers are part of the problem.

So what can be done about all this? For starters, reformers and educators need to realize that they will continue to see things differently—and that's okay. They're supposed to see things differently. Educators are looking from the inside out, and reformers from the outside in. Educators experience how schools work, while reformers concentrate on the results. This should be a healthy tension, and requires the two camps to listen to and learn from each other.

At least four steps can help get us to that place:

First, most educators and reformers are more reasonable than you might imagine from the public debate. The problem is that the loudest voices are the most extreme, while the more measured voices remain silent or get drowned out. Both educators and reformers need to do a better job of challenging, calling out, or reining in those who revel in accusations of malice.

Second, the two sides need to understand that their fates are linked. Educators know where the rubber hits the road, but that's because they spend their days in schools that do things a certain way. The flip side of that is they have less time to craft policies or build relationships with policymakers. It's reformers who have the time and expertise to work with officials to craft new policies, but how those policies play out depends on teachers.

Third, public school teachers need to keep in mind that they're public employees. When outspoken teachers impute evil motives to reformers or discount the importance of test results, it can appear that educators are blind to the problems and unwilling to step up. This is doubly true when those same voices belittle accountability systems

or defend tenure even for colleagues guilty of egregious misbehavior. If teachers want to influence policy, they need to show they're responsive to the concerns of policymakers.

Finally, reformers need to remember that they're not the ones who do the work. After all, policymakers can make people do things, but they can't make them do them well. Unfortunately, when it comes to schooling, how reforms are adopted matters infinitely more than whether they are. This means that educators are not just a "human capital" problem to be solved; they're the ones who are actually educating children. How to help teachers do that better should be the organizing principle of reform.

There's a temptation to pick a side in the school reform wars—to side with the reformers fighting for vulnerable kids or the teachers battling to safeguard our schools. However, both sides have got it only partly right. This means "winning" (at least for the kids) is less a question of picking sides than devising some rules in what has been an anything-goes clash. Mustering the discipline and mutual respect to do this should be an eminently manageable task. After all, as we frequently remind one another, these are our schools and our nation's children. ■



Education policy maven **Rick Hess** of the American Enterprise Institute think tank offers straight talk on matters of policy, politics, research, and reform. Follow Rick on Twitter, and also follow AEI's Education Program.

2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform Released

The American public is displaying its independent streak. Critics of testing will take no comfort from the findings of the 2015 *Education Next* poll—but neither will supporters of the Common Core State Standards, school choice, merit pay, or tenure reform. The unions will not like the public’s view on their demands that nonmembers contribute financially to their activities. Teachers will be unhappy to hear that public enthusiasm for increasing teacher pay falls through the floor when people are told current salary levels and asked if they are willing to pay additional taxes for that purpose. The Obama administration will be equally unhappy to hear what both teachers and the public think about its proposals to require similar student suspension and expulsion rates across racial and ethnic groups.

These are among the many findings to emerge from the ninth annual *Education Next* survey, administered in May and June 2015 to a nationally representative sample of some 4,000 respondents, including oversamples of roughly 700 teachers, 700 African Americans, and 700 Hispanics. The large number of survey respondents enabled us to ask alternative questions on the same topic to determine the sensitivity of opinion to new information and particular wording. We also posed many new questions in 2015, allowing us to explore opinion on curricular and other issues that have never before been examined in a nationally representative survey of the American public. Results from the full survey are available at ednxt.co/1EnvsKo, and for

a graphic display of most findings at educationnext.org/2015-ednext-poll-interactive.

Testing and Accountability

In early 2015, as Congress began rewriting the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), no issue loomed larger than the use of student testing to measure the performance of schools and teachers. Media reports featured teachers decrying a scourge of overtesting. By spring, hundreds of thousands of parents had chosen to have their children “opt out” of state tests, garnering the rousing approval of the teachers unions. Out on the hustings, Republican presidential candidates escalated their critique of the Common Core. The movement to put “the standardized testing machine in reverse,” in the words of New York mayor Bill de Blasio, seemed to have legs.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that in July a bipartisan Senate supermajority of 81–17 passed a revision of NCLB that keeps the federal requirement that all students be tested in math and reading in grades 3 to 8 and again in high school. Has the upper chamber ignored the people’s will? Or, is the public’s appetite for the information provided by regular student testing broader and more robust than the media coverage would indicate? ■

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Friedrichs Plaintiff and AAE Member Karen Cuen Updates Members on Supreme Court Case

After just two years working through the court system, the Supreme Court agreed in June to hear *Friedrichs vs CTA* this fall. As one of the plaintiffs in the case (there are ten of us total), I can't tell you how excited we all are that we will finally have our day before the highest court in the land.

A short backstory

In California, which is not a right-to-work state, a teacher may opt out of the union but is still required to pay their "fair share" dues, which come to about \$600 per year. We first must pay the full dues of \$1,000 and then can receive about \$300 of that back as a "rebate," which is the amount the union says it uses for political purposes. In *Friedrichs*, we are asking the court to go further and rule that both the "fair share" and the political portion of union dues

"Soon we learned that many teachers were apprehensive about taking on the David and Goliath-esque task of engaging CTA/NEA in a legal battle and that only ten of us had stepped up."

Overlooking the Pacific Ocean at Dana Point, the plaintiffs of the Friedrichs case gather from all over the state to discuss the case moving forward. The group has gathered three times since the case was filed in April 2013.

From left to right: Jelena Figueroa, Rebecca Friedrichs, Scott Wilford, Harlan Elrich, Kevin Roughton, George White, Irene Zavala, Peggy Searcy, Karen Cuen (Missing: Jose Manso).



must be voluntary. Our position is that *everything* the union does is inherently political. It's a First Amendment issue. If we put our money where our mouths are, so to speak, then the union is not the voice we want speaking for us. We are tired of funding CTA's agenda.

The *Friedrichs* plaintiffs hail from school districts all over California—Tulare, Fresno, Orange, Anaheim, La Mirada, Saddleback, and Bakersfield, just to name a few. I found out about the lawsuit through AAE, when I received an email in 2013 asking for volunteers to put their faces and reputations behind the lawsuit. I emailed back immediately, thinking there would be so many volunteers that I wouldn't be "accepted" as a plaintiff. Soon we learned that many teachers were apprehensive about taking on the David and Goliath-esque task of engaging CTA/NEA in a legal battle and that only ten of us had stepped up. I totally understand that. I was apprehensive too, not knowing if or how I would be punished by my colleagues for agreeing to participate. As it has turned out, most of my colleagues have been supportive of my right to participate in the suit.

Before the lawsuit, none of us plaintiffs knew each other. In the ensuing two years, we have met together several times, and have grown closer as we have moved through the legal process. We have found that we agree on so many issues, not just those having to do with the case. I am blessed beyond belief to have met this wonderful group of people!

If you'd like to follow the case with no media bias, visit the U.S. Supreme Court Docket and search case number 14-915.

How you can help

First and foremost, if you are a praying person, our case needs prayer. We are up against powerful entities that are angry with us for shaking their beehives. We need people who will pray that justice will prevail. We need prayer that our attorneys will present our case clearly, with confidence and determination. We need prayer for the Justices, that they will think clearly about our case, and rule based on the Constitution, not their personal biases.

Second, when we win our case, we will need help getting the word out to teachers that they no longer have to pay dues to their union. This will affect every teacher in every state that is not yet a right-to-work state. Will the media and the unions themselves help us spread the word? Unlikely. Teachers need to be educated and empowered

to know that they can now control their own purse strings in regard to having to pay (or not) for the privilege of having a job in public education.

This is an exciting time to be a public school teacher! And who knows? A union that can't strong-arm money from its members might just end up being a kinder, gentler organization that makes itself attractive and useful to its prospective members. Seriously, it could happen! ■



Karen Cuen is an elementary school music teacher in Chino Valley USD. As a teacher in Chino, California for over 20 years and a former school board member in her hometown, she gained an understanding of public school politics from both sides of the spectrum. These experiences have sparked her interest in seeing real reform in the near future.

Are you passionate about teacher freedom of choice? Email us at Editor@aaeteachers.org for more information about how to get involved.

Teacher Unions Push Progressive Agenda, but Many Members Aren't on Board

I should begin by saying that I am, proudly, a public school teacher working in a “standard” high school. I am not a political person. Or better put, as a teacher of economics and history, I *choose* not to be partisan.

That’s probably the most infuriating thing about the teachers union bosses signing on to this highly partisan—and economically ludicrous—agenda. They claim to represent all teachers or, at least, all of their members. They obviously don’t.

That’s what makes this and their other acts of political partisanship intolerable. Actions like signing the “Progressive Agenda” reflect extremely poorly on American teachers and make the public believe that all of us are believers in the lunatic fringe of collectivists, socialists, and far-left wing activists. We are certainly not.



“What does the ‘Progressive Agenda’ have to do with educating America’s young people? Absolutely nothing.”

The majority of American teachers are incredibly hard-working professionals who believe in individual liberty, a constitutionally limited government, and the creative power of free market. Although deeply involved in our communities, we are largely either apolitical or politically moderate.

If I were to belong to a teachers union, I would want it to represent teachers as educated, white collar professionals. Instead, the unions make us look as if we are a collection of radical, shop floor, blue collar activists. Mostly, I would want the organization to do everything in its power to support us in our sole mission: teaching children. Instead, these organizations spend members’ dues—dues that are largely involuntarily coerced from the majority of their members—on political causes that the majority of teachers either do not support or actively oppose. What does the “Progressive Agenda” have to do with educating America’s young people? Absolutely nothing.

Actions like signing onto the “Progressive Agenda” are exactly why I refuse to belong to the AFT and the NEA. I am, however, one of the few fortunate teachers who actually has a choice. Sadly, in most states, the teachers unions have cartel-like power over school districts. In those

states, teachers’ association with the unions is involuntary. It is exactly the involuntary nature of the unions’ members that makes the union bosses’ political activism repulsive. Those members have no say in how or on what causes their coerced dues are spent. Their pockets are picked to support others’ radical ideology—not to mention the union leadership’s enormous salaries!

That’s why I’m glad to be a member of the Association of American Educators (AAE), a nonpartisan, professional association for teachers. AAE doesn’t spend a dime on partisan causes or candidacies. I know my membership fees go directly to benefits and services I need, not the politics I don’t.

Regardless of their politics, most American teachers simply aren’t interested in being political pawns. Teachers are a diverse work force, and they need a member-driven association like AAE that truly represents them in their mission to educate America’s children. ■

Vann Prime teaches AP economics and AP European history in Howard County, Maryland. He was Teacher of the Year in 2015 in his highly diverse public high school.

Gateway Teacher & AAE Member Jill Cullis Earns Prestigious National Fellowship Position

Jill Cullis never gets tired of learning. Even after 30 years in front of the chalkboard, her hunger for knowledge has never waned. That hunger and insatiable passion for education is sure to serve her well as she begins a year-long national fellowship program with Hope Street Group.

Cullis is one of just eighteen fellows participating in the national program this upcoming year. Hope Street Group National Teacher Fellows collaborate with local and state leaders to develop strategic, practical solutions that address public policy challenges related to education. In 2015, fellows will work through a cross-state research project to develop solutions targeted at teacher preparation programs.



Photo courtesy of Hope Street Group

Jill Cullis teaches social studies at Gateway HS, Aurora Public Schools. In her 29-year career she's served as an instructional leader in various capacities, conducted training in four different

countries, and been an educational professor in Bogota, Colombia. Jill authored part of the introduction for *Minding the Achievement Gap*. She has worked with the Center for Teaching Quality, Professional Association of Colorado Educators and other organizations to improve education through public policy. She was her school's Teacher of the Year and has a BA degree in History from the University of Northern Colorado and a master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Colorado Christian University.

Jill has this message to give to member teachers like you:

I encourage teachers to get involved in political discussions because it is our opportunity to have a voice for change in education. If we simply sit back and not take action, then other people make the decisions that impact us. I want teachers to be part of the dialog toward solutions. Democracy is not a spectator sport and those of us in the trenches know the reality and unintended consequences of well-intentioned (and perhaps not so well-intentioned) legislation and policies.

Our role at the policy table should be a prominent one. We know best what "reality" looks like in the classroom. We understand the need for change but not simply for change sake. Too many times legislators and policymakers ask us to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources without bringing those who will be responsible for implementing those changes to the table. We are not opposed to accountability, but when we as teachers in the classroom are not asked for our opinion, we are shortchanged. As an example, the number of those working at the AD building has increased greatly, but the support staff in the classroom has been limited because of budget cuts.

If teachers don't get involved, we risk not having a chance to make a difference. We risk being shut out of the political process. We risk having policies imposed upon us without our consent. We risk being part of the problem and not the solution.

AAE/PACE provides teachers with the voice teachers need. Every year AAE/PACE asks our opinion on a national survey, and as an organization it takes its "direction" from the results of that survey. It truly wants to hear from teachers and asks us to be engaged in all levels of education.

I am looking for teachers throughout Colorado and the nation to be involved in virtual focus groups such as those offered through AAE/PACE. These groups focus on solutions for policy and legislation regarding teacher preparation. I would love for AAE/PACE to have a strong voice for change and solutions for the next generation of teachers. But that can only happen if you make it happen. We owe it to posterity to create solutions that truly will improve education for tomorrow and beyond.

Jill Cullis
Colorado, High School History and Civics Teacher ■

Read more about Jill at tinyurl.com/q3qoyxp!



The Association of American Educators Foundation
 27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230
 Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

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Do you know a teacher who is interested in membership? Direct them to aaeteachers.org/membership to learn why AAE is right for them.



AAE Teacher Survey of the Month

? Do you believe strikes and boycotts help or harm the image of educators?

▶ Take the survey at tinyurl.com/October15Survey today and be entered to win an AAE Prize Pack just for letting us know.

You can also scan the QR code to take this survey on your phone!



Tuition Discounts for AAE Members

Thinking about getting an advanced degree? AAE is proud to announce a new addition to our tuition discounts! We are now offering a discount to the University of Arizona's Special Education Graduate Program.

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