

Education Matters

September 2008

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Superteacher

What if "improving teacher quality" isn't the answer?

By Mike Petrilli

Are we in the season of school reform discontent, when the core assumptions of the past decade were reexamined? Are assumptions such as those that gave birth to the "Washington Consensus," which in turn created No Child Left Behind, being questioned anew? So it appears.

There is the broader/bolder crowd, that argues that it's unfair to hold schools accountable for raising student achievement because so much that influences achievement is outside of schools' control. There is the growing chorus of voices that wonders whether "closing the achievement gap" should continue to be the primary objective of our education system, mostly because such an objective implies that we are not much interested in maximizing the progress of white, middle-class, and/or high-achieving students.

Allow me to add yet another dollop of doubt to the reform consensus: Are we sure that "improving teacher quality" is the panacea that so many (including us and our friends) have suggested? Is it possible that our current fascination with "human capital development" is misguided? That

both presidential campaigns' embrace of this issue is ill-considered?

Yes, the research is quite clear that the quality of a student's teacher has a greater impact on that student's achievement than anything else that schools can control. It is also clear that low-income and minority

children are much less likely to be taught by "high-quality teachers" (however defined) than are affluent and white children. So reformers make the jump: "If we could just fill every classroom with society's 'best and brightest,' we would have our education problems licked." Or, they continue, "If we could just get our most talented teachers to serve in our neediest schools, we would have our achievement gap beat."

The Recruiting Problem

Unfortunately, we cannot hire enough great teachers, and we cannot get the best teachers to serve in the neediest areas. So what is our Plan B? Why can't we recruit millions of fabulous teachers (assuming, that is, that we need millions)? Haven't Teach For America (TFA) and The New Teacher Project (TNTP) proven that, by employing the right recruiting methods, top-notch college graduates and seasoned mid-career professionals will flock to needy classrooms? Yes and no. They have certainly demonstrated that many more of our "best and brightest" are willing to teach, at least for short periods of time,



than lots of people once assumed. TFA is growing robustly: this fall's class will reach 5,000 teachers, up from 1,000 ten years ago. And TNTP is getting great results in a handful of major cities. In New York City, for example, almost one in ten current teachers came through its Teaching Fellows Program—and now that city's "teacher quality gap" is shrinking. The strategy of opening up the teacher pipeline to nontraditional routes is clearly showing some success in some areas. (Areas, by the way, that tend to attract young high-flyers; the list of such areas is unfortunately short.) But this strategy isn't showing success at scale. And thanks to our national obsession with "reducing class size," we boast a teacher work force of more than three million; teachers coming through TFA and TNTP are a metaphorical drop in the bucket.

Alternate Routes?

Certainly many more new teachers these days are entering classrooms through alternate routes (up to a third, according to some estimates), but we found last year that most alternative certification is of dubious quality and does not attract stellar candidates. Furthermore, the teacher recruitment challenge is only going to get tougher in coming years as Baby Boomers retire en masse. Many of the Boomer teachers taught for thirty-odd years; they will likely be replaced by twenty-somethings who will last five years at best. (That's not necessarily because education has a "retention" problem but because

today's twenty-somethings don't work anywhere for more than a few years.) And the education system will be competing against other employers for top-notch college grads, particularly since the number of workers in their 30s and 40s is dropping precipitously. (This is the demographic "trough" between the Boomers and

Will Incentives Work?

their children.) The math doesn't lie: it's highly unlikely that we're ever going to recruit three million "great" teachers. That leads to the other teacher quality strategy du jour: creating incentives (or mandates) for great teachers to serve in tough areas, thereby (if it works) at least creating a more equitable distribution of top teachers. By all means, let's try it, particularly the incentives variety. Let's see if ten or twenty thousand dollars extra a year will entice the most effective teachers into the most challenging schools. (However, it is going to be a trick to find that money during a recession.) But compelling great teachers to work in rough schools will definitely fail, for the same reason that busing failed three decades ago: we live in a free country, and if pushed into neighborhoods where they don't want to be, teachers, like parents, will leave the system.

That would be the likely result of the laudable Title I "comparability" rules, whereby districts would have to ensure that each of their schools' payrolls would be roughly the same. (Affluent schools now tend to have much larger payrolls because they can recruit veteran teachers, who earn much more than rookies.) That would mean recouping money from middle-class schools and forcing them to release some of their more expensive teachers, all in the hope such teachers will gladly transfer to a school across town in a tougher neighborhood. Unlikely. What's

more probable is that these teachers will leave the district entirely and head to the suburbs—just as desegregation-era parents did.

The challenge these reforms can't overcome is the simple fact that most local teacher markets span multiple school districts. Equalizing the teacher distribution within one district is hard to do when teachers can simply move to another district. And equalizing the teacher distribution between districts is tougher still because it requires equalizing funding between districts. (Otherwise, the better funded districts can always outbid the others when it comes to teacher salaries.) And, although our funding system has grown more equitable in recent years in terms of the allocation of state dollars, does anyone believe that the wealthiest suburban districts will ever give up the extra funding and salary advantages they hold over their neighbors?

Summary

So let's summarize: We're unlikely to fill all of America's classrooms with teachers from the ranks of society's "best and brightest." And we're particularly unlikely to do so in tough urban or rural areas, outside of a handful of hot cities where young college grads like to live. This means that lots of our children—especially poor and minority children—are going to have teachers who may be good but are not likely to be great. These are teachers who themselves received so-so public school educations, attended so-so colleges, are raising families and thus probably don't want to work sixty hours a week but do care about their students and want them to succeed.

Shouldn't we be thinking about how to make these average teachers more effective, too, and augmenting them via technology and other stratagems, rather than putting all our eggs in the "superstar teacher" basket? ■



Mike Petrilli is Vice President for National Programs and Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, where he oversees the Foundation's research projects and publications, including The Education Gaffly.

Invisible Ink

Where the Real Power Resides Regarding the Rules and Rights of Teachers

By Emily Cohen

It is time to revisit the rallying cry over collective bargaining agreements being a school district's ball and chain. While the local bargaining table is still the most important venue for negotiating some issues like annual pay raises, it is not where the fundamental factors shaping teacher quality get decided. This popular but mistaken view paints an overly simplistic picture of how teachers are governed, and dangerously ignores the actual forces at play influencing teacher quality.

When National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) began building its TR³ database nearly two years ago, we learned that much of what we expected to find in collective bargaining agreements, such as tenure and teacher dismissal, weren't there. The contracts were silent. But their silence does not mean that there isn't a lot said about such matters. Much of what we assumed to be in the purview of local bargaining agreements was actually found elsewhere.

As we describe in more detail in the NCTQ brief, *Invisible Ink in Collective Bargaining*, we realized that it is the state that decides issues that many assume are decided in the local contract. In fact, nearly every aspect of the teaching career is decided by the state—even when the local district and union are legally able to negotiate. For example, states may set the minimum number of years for tenure or the minimum frequency in which teacher evaluations may occur. Theoretically, districts could negotiate a more rigorous evaluation or tenure process, but this rarely happens. The state minimum—at least in areas other than teacher salary or benefits—usually becomes the de facto maximum adopted by the district.

Certainly, the importance of state legislatures and school boards is well known to teacher unions. They routinely flex their muscle with state legislatures, lobbying for policies that may be in the best interests of their members but often at odds with what is in the best interests of students and teacher quality. Unions caught on a while ago that it is far more efficient to have an impact on governance issues by getting a law passed that applies to the whole state rather than negotiating contracts in individual districts.

Understanding the complex web of state statute, regulation, local school board policy, and local collective bargaining agreement on the work lives of teachers is essential to improving teacher quality. ■



To read *Invisible Ink* in *Collective Bargaining*, visit www.nctq.org.

Emily Cohen manages the National Council on Teacher Quality's work on collective bargaining. Prior to joining NCTQ, she was a teacher in Texas.

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CLASS SIZE DEBATE LIVES ON

If you thought the class size debate should have been over and done with years ago, researchers Thomas Dee and Martin West should give you pause. Their new study looks at the noncognitive effects of smaller class sizes—things such as engagement, motivation, self discipline, homework completion—and whether these qualities improve educational outcomes later in life (e.g., high school graduation) and success in the labor market.

Reanalyzing data from the well-known Tennessee STAR study of class size as well as from a nationally representative survey of older students, the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1998, Dee and West find that smaller class sizes do make a difference on noncognitive behaviors. The trick is when to reduce class

size in order to see the most gains. They argue that while any effects of class size in the early grades (1-3) quickly dissipate, class size reductions in the later years may be much more effective in producing returns, particularly when targeted at urban schools.

Although the authors didn't use specific definitions of small and large classes—making any sort of policy takeaway a bit fuzzy—they define a class size reduction of about 6 students as significant. The average class size in the sample was 24.5 students, and the effects of smaller class sizes were seen in classes with 18 students. So advice to state legislators who love to drop class sizes by a student or two: either do it right or don't do it at all.



James Bond, She Ain't

A school superintendent in Everett, Washington, is taking an early retirement, after receiving a death threat related to a video camera installed to spy on a teacher.

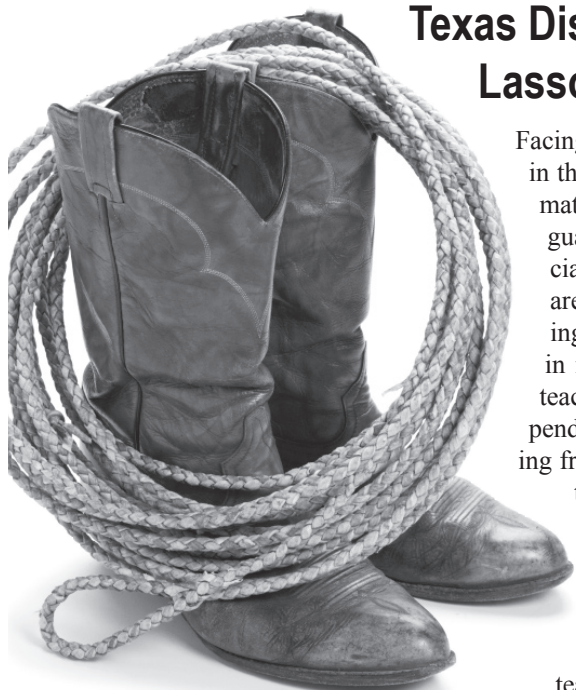
Carol Whitehead had a camera placed in a popular 40-year veteran's classroom to prove the teacher had been using the classroom on Saturday mornings to

moderate an underground student publication. After being explicitly told to stop helping her seditious students, the camera confirmed that she had ignored the directives.

What we don't get is why the superintendent didn't just pop into school on a Saturday morning. Sleeping in?

Texas Districts Try to Lasso Teachers

Facing severe teacher shortages in the usual subject areas (ELL, math, science and foreign languages), school district officials in the Dallas/Fort Worth area are laying out some enticing bait in the hopes of reeling in new prospects. Prospective teachers in Texas can earn stipends and signing bonuses ranging from \$2,500 in Dallas proper to \$7,500 in the nearby Cedar Hill school district. The Irving school district is offering a \$50,000 yearly salary for first-year bilingual teachers, well above the usual starting pay of about \$34,000.



Connecticut Requires Reading Test for Teachers



Connecticut has one of the nation's most pernicious gaps in achievement between its affluent and its disadvantaged students, but help may be on the way. The state is about to require as a condition of licensure that all elementary teachers must pass a test that shows they know how to teach reading.

As shown in National Council on Teacher Quality's study *What Education Schools Aren't Teaching About Reading and What Elementary Teachers Aren't Learning*, most teacher preparation programs do not train teachers in the

science of reading instruction. Connecticut's test will surely turn up the heat on its education schools, particularly since the state has adopted the rigorous, research-based test used by its northern neighbor, Massachusetts.

Margie B. Gillis, director of Connecticut's Haskins Literacy Initiative, praised the new requirement for recognizing that just knowing how to read does not mean one can teach it to others: "That may be true for riding a bicycle, that may be true for driving a car. Unfortunately, reading is not that."

This month's Sign of the Times articles are courtesy of TQBulletin, a publication of National Council on Teaching Quality. For more information, visit www.nctq.org.

Grading Ourselves

National Survey Is Cause for Reflection

By Liam Julian

The second annual survey of U.S. adults' opinions about education—conducted under the auspices of *Education Next* and Harvard's Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG)—is now out, and it seems that the public's generally despondent mood has dipped like four-dollar-a-gallon gasoline into the realm of public schooling.

Note to presidential candidates: No Child Left Behind is growing more unpopular. In 2007, 57 percent of respon-

dents supported reauthorization of that law with no more than minor changes; in 2008, only half do. Forty-two percent of public-school educators, who are charged with implementing No Child Left Behind, don't want it to be renewed in any guise.

And overall, opinions of local public schools have declined during the past year. The percentage of African-Americans that bestows on such schools an A or B dropped 7 points (from 27 percent to 20 percent) and the percentage that bestows on them a D or F increased 11 points (from 20 percent to 31 percent). Only 40 percent of all respondents give their local schools an A or a B. In contrast, 64 percent thought their local police force worthy of an A or B grade, and 70 percent believe their neighborhood post offices worthy of such high marks.

Sixty-nine percent of respondents support national standards and testing. Forty-two percent support charter schools and only 16 percent

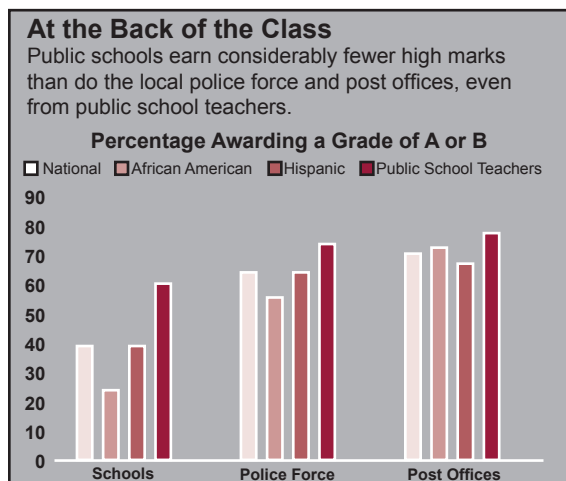
oppose them. Sixty-five percent of African-Americans and 63 percent of Hispanics support school vouchers.

Then there is this finding, which may shock the nation's diversity defenders: 63 percent of all respondents (and 58 percent of African-Americans) oppose the use of race to determine school assignments. Only 16 percent of the public thinks districts should "definitely" or "probably" be allowed to assign a pupil to a school based on his racial background.

Furthermore, 62 percent of respondents believe that family income should not be used when constructing school assignments; i.e., socioeconomic integration is opposed by a strong majority of the American public. ■

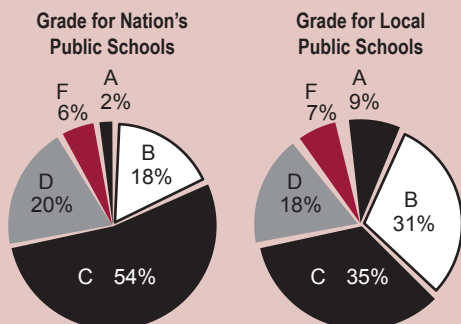


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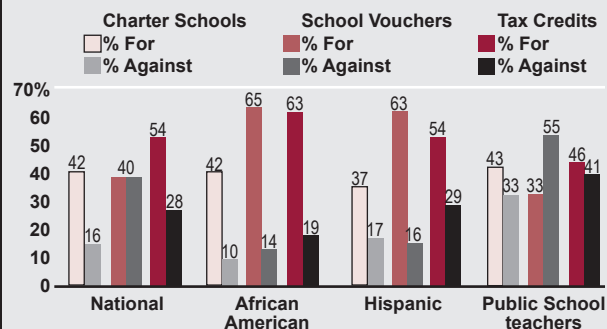
Grade C Schools?

Eighty percent of Americans give the nation's public schools a grade of C or worse, while 60 percent assign such grades to the schools in their own community.

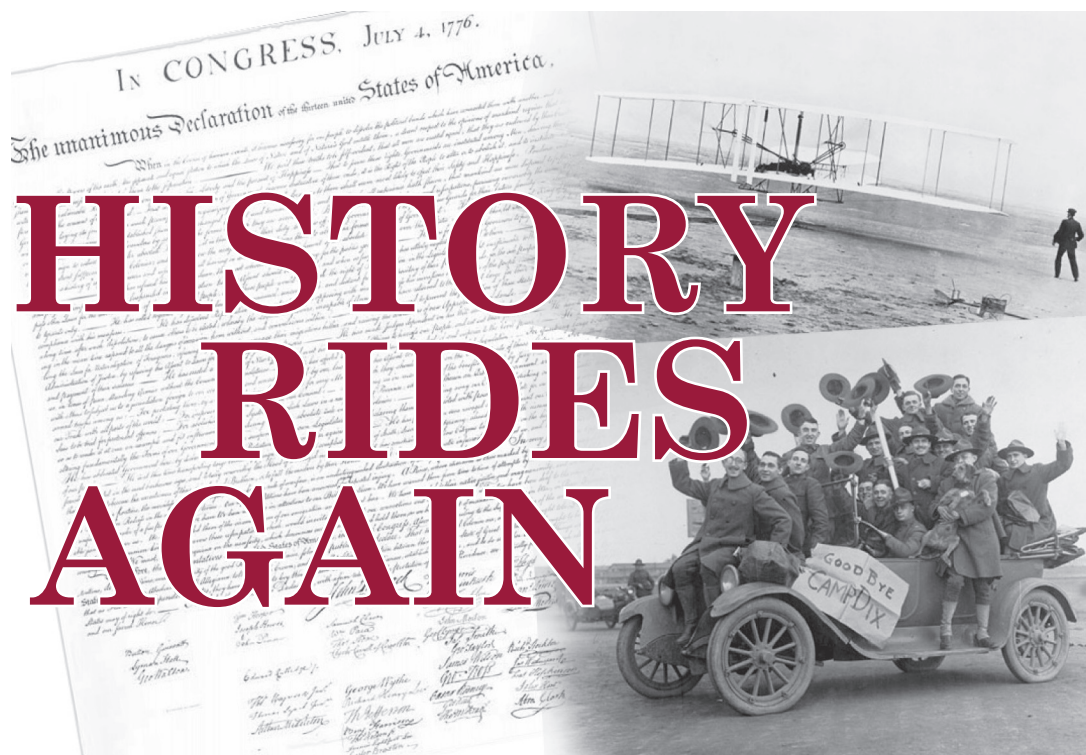


Support and Opposition

A majority of the public support tax credits for private schools; similar pluralities support both charters and vouchers.



HISTORY RIDES AGAIN



Teachers' knowledge of history content rose by 21 percent among school districts awarded the Teaching American History Grant, according to an independent evaluation performed for the American Institute for History Education (AIHE). The results are based on more than twenty representative school districts that use the institute's professional development system across the country.

The results point to the success of the U.S. Department of Education's Teaching American History (TAH) Grant, which awards funds to eligible school districts nationwide. Three-year programs seek to improve teachers' knowledge base and effectiveness in teaching American History.

"As demonstrated throughout the country, the Teaching American History Grant, together with AIHE professional development can make a measurable difference in the level of history education," says Kevin T. Brady, president of AIHE. "Our continued mission is to help districts throughout the country apply for the grant and then work with them to

achieve similarly noteworthy results."

Among the findings:

- Teachers increased their content knowledge by eleven raw points (21 percent) in the course of one year, based on their grant pre-tests to end-of-year post-tests.
- Urban district teachers improved even more, scoring sixteen raw points higher over the course of one year.
- Students of teachers in their second year of the program scored 30 percent higher on a test of nationally validated history content questions than students in a matched comparison district.
- Urban students of teachers in the program scored 44 percent higher than students in matched comparison.



The American Institute for History Education provides educators with resources that include lectures from top historians, scholars, and university professors, and national experts in the fields of curriculum development, history, and social sciences. Its online toolbox, "Cicero: History Beyond the Textbook," delivers additional tools for classroom use and professional development, including downloadable

lesson plans, period-related audio clips, art, lyrics and music, historical event maps and interactive battle maps, classroom PowerPoint presentations, and assessment methods and formulas.

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education awarded \$116 million in Teaching American History grants to local education agencies. AIHE currently works on more than fifty of these grants nationally and provides grant-writing services to school districts free of charge.

The American Institute for History Education was established to provide substantive, engaging historical content and activities for high school, middle school, and elementary school teachers to use in their classrooms. The Institute's Liberty Fellowship program dramatically increases students' comprehension of historical events, personalities, and issues, as well as improves their overall critical thinking, reading and comprehension skills, contributing to increased student achievement.

AIHE specializes in teacher professional development, curriculum development, teacher training workshops, field study trips, and interactive resources. Visit www.AIHE.info for more information as well as links to school districts that have partnered with the American Institute for History Education. ■



How are High Gas Prices Impacting Your School?



A survey has been released by the House Education and Labor Committee that asks teachers, parents, and concerned citizens to tell

their stories about how high gas prices have impacted them.

"Schools across the country are bracing for staffing and program cuts because of rising energy costs. The school week is being shortened, and student activities are being eliminated. Our students, teachers, and schools are at the mercy of America's energy policy, and they're suffering because of it," said Rep. Howard P. "Buck" McKeon (R-CA), the ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee.

For instance, some schools in Idaho are looking at shortening the school week to four days and canceling field trips.

The results of the survey will be shared with members of both parties in an effort to help get a clearer picture of what is needed for energy reform.

To take the survey, visit <http://republicans.edlabor.house.gov>.

Math, Science Education Problems Addressed



During the summer, the House Education and Labor Committee held a hearing to discuss the importance of improving math and science education in the United States. The National Mathematics Advisory Panel released a report in March that concluded that math education in the U.S. is "broken and must be fixed" if the U.S. is to remain competitive in the world.

Witnesses at the hearing emphasized the fact that there should be greater coordination between education and business communities, especially for science, technology, engineering, and technology (STEM) education, as well as more training for teachers.

For more information about the hearing, visit the Education and Labor majority website at <http://edlabor.house.gov>.

Improving NCLB for All Students Act



Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) has released legislation to renew No Child Left Behind. The Improving NCLB for All Students Act contains provisions to increase flexibility in

NCLB.

"Although the legislative year is drawing to a close, the school year is just about to get started," said Castle. "We must continue the education reform dialogue and press ahead in our efforts to make the No Child Left Behind Act stronger and more reflective of what students and schools need to succeed."

Some of the components of the bill include growth models, uniform graduation rates, alternative assessments for English Language Learners, and the use of Reading First.

New AFT President Wants New Role for Schools



Newly elected AFT president, Randi Weingarten, has declared she believes schools in the future should serve medical and social service roles as well as educational. "Imagine schools that are open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities, child care and preschool, tutoring and homework assistance," she said. "Schools that include dental, medical and counseling clinics." Ms. Weingarten admits that she does not know how much schools like these will cost.

Oregon receives \$9.5 Mil. Grant for Charter Schools



Oregon has become the latest recipient of a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to help implement and grow charter schools. The state received a competitive grant in the amount of \$9.5 million from the Department's Charter School Program to increase the number of quality charter schools in Oregon to meet the diverse needs of the children in the state.

"Supporting the growth of new, high-

quality charter schools is critical to our efforts to improve the educational opportunities for all children," Assistant Deputy Secretary for Innovation and Improvement Doug Mesecar said. "Oregon has continued to demonstrate strong annual growth in the number of charter schools that school districts are authorizing."

Four other states, New York, Idaho, Florida, and Utah, will also receive grants from the Department's Charter School Program. Priority is given to states that give charter schools greater levels of autonomy over budgets and expenditures and have demonstrated that a high number of schools are being held accountable and are reaching their objectives.

For more information about the grants, go to <http://www.ed.gov/news>.

Funds for Special Ed Training Granted



The U.S. Department of Education recently gave \$2.4 million in grants to help institutions train special education teachers who work

with children who have high incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation. The grants will be used by teacher preparation programs to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

"We consistently hear from state, local, and higher education officials that personnel preparation programs for special education teachers should be restructured or redesigned for graduates of these programs to meet the highly qualified teacher requirements in IDEA," said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

The grants will help teacher preparation programs implement research-proven strategies to help raise the student achievement of students with high incidence disabilities and expand mentoring and clinical learning opportunities in schools.



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Protect Yourself

Five ways to guard against accusations of sexual misconduct

By La Rae G. Munk

The news of teachers and sexual misconduct continues to grab headlines across the country. While there are clearly problems with teacher misconduct, it is also becoming clear that some students have learned to use false allegations of sexual misconduct as a weapon of revenge against teachers.

All too frequently, administrators are accepting the student's version of events. In too many situations, administrators are not even bothering to properly investigate an allegation before issuing a reprimand or placing a teacher on suspension. This is true whether the allegation is sexual misconduct, physical abuse, or even just using a word that a student does not appreciate. The result is that teachers are experiencing unnecessary discipline and damage to their reputation under a theory of "guilty before proven innocent."

How should you protect yourself from false accusations? Here are five practical steps you can take to limit the opportunities for false accusations of sexual misconduct.

1. Never be alone in a private area with a student. If a student comes into the classroom and you happen to be alone, immediately step into a public area such as the hallway. When a student wants to speak about a confidential matter, you can



do this while in a public area by speaking in a quiet voice.

2. Do not give students your home phone number. Should it be necessary for you to call a student at home, insist that

might be open to different interpretations. For example, a student's question about human anatomy in a science class should be documented.

Teachers have faced situations where those "innocent" questions and the subsequent answers resulted in a reprimand because of the different interpretations that were passed along to others.

5. Teachers have learned the hard way that they must keep a professional perspective and style in talking with

students. You shouldn't talk with students in the same manner as a parent.

Should you have any concerns regarding your conduct towards students, remember the old adage, "When in doubt, don't." Act with caution and seek guidance and approval from administrators before taking unilateral action that might be open to unintended interpretations. ■

La Rae G. Munk is Director of Legal Services for the Association of American Educators.

All too frequently, administrators are accepting the student's version of events. In too many situations, administrators are not even bothering to properly investigate an allegation before issuing a reprimand or placing a teacher on suspension.

a parent also be on the phone during the conversation.

3. If it becomes necessary to give a student a ride in your vehicle, you should do this only if you have another adult to accompany you, and you have notified the parent or an administrator that you are doing so.

4. Keep detailed notes of daily activities in class. This is particularly important for those comments by students that



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