

Debate: Are Teachers' Unions the Problem—or the Answer?

Randi Weingarten, Rod Paige, and others debate education reform.

By **Jerry Adler** | Newsweek Web Exclusive

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Long overshadowed by other domestic issues, education-policy reform has begun moving up on the Obama administration's agenda. Teachers' unions, which supported President Obama's election, are pushing back against some of the changes proposed by his education secretary, Arne Duncan, which they view as a threat to some of their hard-won contract gains—especially after a Rhode Island district, on the advice of federal officials, took the radical step of firing the entire teaching staff of a poorly performing high school. Seeking to change their image of intransigence in defending every last job of every teacher, the unions maintain that they share the goal of improving schools and turning out better-educated students. The most recent Intelligence Squared U.S. debate, on March 16, went to the heart of this issue, tackling the topic "Don't Blame Teachers Unions for Our Failing Schools."

Arguing for the motion—in defense of the unions—were Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.4-million-member American Federation of Teachers (AFT); Kate McLaughlin, an elementary-school teacher in Lowell, Mass., and executive vice president of her AFT local; and Gary Smuts, superintendent of the ABC Unified School District in Cerritos, Calif.



Speaking against the motion—holding the unions responsible for poor schools—were Terry Moe, a professor of political science at Stanford and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution; Rod Paige, a former superintendent of schools in Houston and secretary of education from 2001 to 2005; and Larry Sand, a longtime teacher in the New York and Los Angeles school systems and president of the California

Teachers Empowerment Network, a nonpartisan resource for the state's teachers.

The moderator was John Donvan of ABC News.

Edited excerpts from the debate:

Weingarten: It's no wonder that people are looking for an entity to blame for school failures. But blaming unions for failing schools is like blaming the middle class for the recession. Our union's mantra is "what is good for kids and what is fair for teachers." If teachers' unions were to blame for failing schools, then places like Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, who have relatively few unionized teachers, would do much better than the states with the most densely unionized teachers—Massachusetts, New York, Maryland. But those are the states whose schools do best.

So there are problems to solve, one of which is poverty. And I would argue that having a strong union, an entity that will look at what is done right and what is wrong and solve things and change things, is the way to go. We need well-prepared and well-supported teachers, early-childhood education, and a focus on graduation. We find these elements in lots of different places, and the differences between the places that work and those that don't is good labor-management relations.

Moe: We're not saying that unions are responsible for every problem of the public schools, but they are major obstacles to reform. An obvious example: the teachers' unions have fought for protections in contracts and in state laws that make it virtually impossible to get bad teachers out of the classroom. On average it takes two years, \$200,000 and 15 percent of the principal's time to get one bad teacher out of the classroom. As a result, principals don't even try. They give 99 percent of teachers satisfactory evaluations. The bad teachers just stay in the classroom. The unions are also responsible for seniority rules that often require districts to lay off junior people before senior people. It's happening all around the country now. And some of these junior people are the best teachers in the district, and some of the senior people being saved are the worst. Would anyone in his right mind organize schools this way if all they cared about was what's best for kids?

These issues are just part of a larger problem. Our nation has been trying to reform the schools since the early 1980s, and the whole time the teachers unions have used their political power to block it. Consider charter schools. There are many kids stuck in schools that aren't teaching them. They need options, and charter schools can provide them. But charter schools are a threat to teachers unions. If you give kids a choice and they leave regular public schools, they take money and jobs with them, and that's what the unions want to stop. So they've used their political power to put a ceiling on the numbers of charter schools. As a result we have 4,600 charter schools and well over 90,000 public schools, and huge waiting lists of people desperate to get into charter schools.

McLaughlin: There is no research that correlates student achievement to collective bargaining rights, either for or against. So people can say what they want, but in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts our students perform higher than anybody else in this country, [and] we have the strongest collective bargaining rights in the country. What bargaining rights do is provide dignity for a profession that frankly gets beat up on a lot. We do that with language that improves working conditions for teachers but also for children. For example, we could have language setting class sizes in the teachers' contract. Collective bargaining rights can also help ensure academic freedom. There are times as a teacher that I need to advocate for a child, I may need to say something an administrator might not appreciate my saying in front of a parent. I need to be able to do that without fear, and that's why collective bargaining rights are so important in a classroom: to be able to do what you know is best for children.

Paige: Teachers' unions represent the most dominant political force in American education—highly financed, highly organized, mammoth organizations. The National Education Association has 3.2 million members, 14,000 locals, and in 2007 they collected about \$400 million from their members. In America about 12 percent of the workforce is unionized, but in education it's 38 percent. Teachers' unions sit on both sides of the negotiating table in many cases. They have representatives on the school boards, so they're negotiating with themselves.

You heard a lot about children. Don't be fooled: teachers unions' main interest is the welfare of their members. In 2000, a Buffalo school district was the most unionized public school system in the U.S. At 7 a.m. on a school day, with many children already on their way to school, the leaders of the teachers union called a strike. Does that sound like an organization that cares about kids?

Smuts: I am from the ABC Unified School District in Southern California, with about 21,000 students. Don't blame my district's union for failing schools. They're one of the reasons my district is successful. Student achievement is the main work of our teachers' union. In fact, last year the union reps changed their title from "union rep" to "learning rep." And they were told by the union president, your No. 1 job is student achievement.

In my district, 10 struggling schools have just received a grant for innovative programs, \$3.3 million from the AFT national organization. In other districts throughout the United States, they're working on community partnerships, working on using student assessment data to evaluate teachers. Twice each year the AFT hosts the Shanker Institute, with workshops on reform, quality, curriculum standards—I have been part of that since 2005, and there has never been a session on how to keep crummy teachers. If you're for charters, for holding teachers accountable, listen to the AFT.

Sand: I'm glad Larry brought up Mr. [Albert] Shanker [former president of the American Federation of Teachers] because he is alleged to have said, "When schoolchildren start paying dues, that's when I'll represent them." I don't know if he did say that, but that's been the teachers' union attitude ever since I began my teaching career. In educating children there is nothing more valuable than a dedicated and gifted teacher and nothing more harmful than a bad one. And it's those, the mediocre and incompetent ones, that the unions typically represent. Unions insist that school districts not pay good teachers what they're worth; they insist on an archaic factory model of payment based on years on the job.

Consider the greatest teacher of our time, Jaime Escalante, subject of the film *Stand and Deliver*, who attracted national attention by teaching college-level calculus to gang members and other "unteachables." But because he was willing to have more students in his class than the United Teachers of Los Angeles contract allowed for, he was basically run out of town by that union.

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