

Revisiting the Education Controversy Paper

Gordon Stables, University of Southern California, April 2011

Last spring I wrote a paper encouraging the intercollegiate debate community to consider debating education policy as its national topic. I argued that a combination of factors increased the rationale to debate education: the tremendous shift in the national conversation about education, the rise of market based educational programs, the remarkable gap in how long intercollegiate debate has considered this topic (last in 1986-87), and the increasing interest of the debate community in reflexivity examining itself. All of these trends provided an opportunity debate reducing the role of market based educational programs in 2010-11 and the trends have only become more prominent in the past year. Based on feedback during the year I am resubmitting the education proposal with a brief update explaining why the proposal is still very viable.

The fundamental argument in the original paper was the claim that there is an emerging policy consensus in favor of these neo-liberal or market based educational reforms. Even as President Obama and congressional Republicans clash over most issues, there is broad support to revise No Child Left Behind and implement the types of evaluation and charter programs the topic paper described as core aspects of neoliberal education.

Nick Anderson, Washington Post, November 3, 2010, "Obama could push education reform in effort to work with a divided Congress" <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/03/AR2010110305410.html>

If President Obama is seeking common ground with Republicans in the next Congress, one major domestic issue seems ripe for deal-making: education.

Obama aides say the administration plans early next year to accelerate its push for a rewrite of the Bush-era No Child Left Behind law. That effort will face plenty of obstacles from both sides of the aisle in a divided Congress.

But key Republican lawmakers appear receptive to the president's overtures on education reform in part because Obama backs teacher performance pay, charter schools and other innovations that challenge union orthodoxy.

"This is a top, top priority for the president," said Melody Barnes, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council. **"This is and has been a bipartisan issue.** We think it transcends ideology."

Recent examination suggests that these reforms will continue in the fall 2011 congressional session. We face the possibility of being able to debate education reform as the Congress would push education policy in the opposite direction.

Michael Collins, Scripps Howard News Service, April 18, 2011, "No Child Left Behind school reform law may face own overhaul" <http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/education-reform041811/education-reform041811/>

After nearly a decade, a landmark education reform law that dictates the way students are tested and holds schools accountable for student performance may be in for a major overhaul itself. President Barack Obama's administration is pushing for significant changes to the No Child Left Behind Act and has asked Congress to complete its rewrite of the law by the time the new school year begins this fall.

Though some lawmakers consider the time frame unrealistic, many concede the time for updating the law is long overdue.

These proposed legislative changes are consistent with the Obama administration approach to education which has consistently favored greater roles for high-stakes testing and market solutions. Although there is active debate about these claims, the Obama administration is entering this reform program arguing that reform is needed because, as early as next year, 80% of schools could fail to meet national standards.

Michael Collins, Scripps Howard News Service, April 18, 2011, "No Child Left Behind school reform law may face own overhaul" <http://www.therepublic.com/view/story/education-reform041811/education-reform041811/>

No Child Left Behind, which took effect in 2002, is considered by many to be the signature achievement of former President George W. Bush, who signed it into law after less than a year in office.

The goal was to make sure that all students have a shot at a good education and to hold schools accountable if they don't.

The law mandated that schools set academic standards and test students annually in reading and math while they are in grades three through eight and once while they are in high school. All students also must be tested periodically in science.

Test results are then used to determine whether schools are making adequate yearly progress.

Those that aren't are considered "failing" and can face severe consequences, including closure or replacing staff.

But critics have long argued the law is too punitive, places so much emphasis on reading and math scores that other subjects are given short shrift, and doesn't take into account that some schools may fall short because of a handful of low-performing students.

What's more, they contend, the law saddled schools with what is now recognized as an unattainable goal: that all students should be proficient in reading and math by 2014.

Currently, about 37 percent of all schools fail to meet their performance goals. But by next year, that number could climb as high as 82 percent, or roughly four out of five schools, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan warned recently.

The discussion of failing schools increasingly is seen as evidence of ineffective teachers and reinforces calls for the weakening of teachers unions. This linkage between labor and education was visible in the Wisconsin collective bargaining fight. These local conflicts are evidence of how much is at stake with education policy.

Valerie Strauss, Washington Post, April 18, 2011, “Resistance to test-based school reform is growing” http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/resistance-to-test-based-school-reform-is-growing/2011/04/18/AFkb0n0D_blog.html

Though President Obama said recently that kids are tested too much, his administration’s policies have contributed to the increase in high-stakes testing, which began with the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act of President George W. Bush. Obama’s Race to the Top initiative supports performance pay, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan has called for radical change in public school districts.

The nation watched for weeks as Wisconsin teachers protested in the state capitol in Madison, speaking out against plans by the governor, Scott Walker (R), to strip them and other public employees of most of their bargaining rights. But there have been other, lesser-known protests over school reform and funding measures, including:

* **A small but growing number of parents in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and other states are refusing to allow their children to take standardized tests.**

* **Parents have organized groups — in person and online — in Florida, New York, Indiana and other states to share information, sign petitions and organize protests against reforms. And many are blogging about experiences in their districts.**

These local controversies are spilling to national attention. Education policy is increasing visible precisely because the battle for reform is increasingly being fought in communities across the nation. This is a rare moment of national attention.

Richard Whitmire, immediate past president of the National Education Writers, April 4, 2011, Huffington Post, “Why Rhee Remains at the Core of the Controversies” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-whitmire/michelle-rhee-controversy_b_843727.html

In a time of multiple wars around the globe and a nuclear meltdown in Japan, you wouldn't expect to see so many front page stories about education policy fights -- but you do. In Florida, Idaho, Minnesota, New York... almost everywhere.

What's happening? And why does former Washington D.C. schools chief, Michelle Rhee, keep popping up in so many of these fights -- even when she's not a player in some of those states? The answer is that **two decades of debates over improving public schools are coming to a head. It's time to take sides, so the scramble is on.**

In one camp are most teachers, traditional liberals, the teachers unions and the politicians who win their support. To them, school accountability reforms have swerved in a dangerous and unfair direction -- singling out teachers. The real culprits, they say, are not ineffective teachers but the unsolved problems of race and poverty.

In the other camp are liberal reformers, conservatives, charter school operators, some young public school teachers and the politicians who win their support. This camp believes that schools can put a dent in the problems of race and poverty, but only with stiff accountability focused primarily on one target -- singling out teachers.

Education also remained prominent on the national agenda because of the documentary “Waiting for Superman.” This film generated a great deal of discussion about education and critics argue it reinforced the perspective that only market reforms (like the charter schools featured in the film) are capable of rescuing US education.

Dana Goldstein, September 23, 2010, The Nation, "Grading 'Waiting for Superman'"
<http://www.thenation.com/article/154986/grading-waiting-superman>

Here's what you see in *Waiting for Superman*, the new documentary that celebrates the charter school movement while blaming teachers unions for much of what ails American education: working- and middle-class parents desperate to get their charming, healthy, well-behaved children into successful public charter schools.

Here's what you don't see: the four out of five charters that are no better, on average, than traditional neighborhood public schools (and are sometimes much worse); charter school teachers, like those at the Green Dot schools in Los Angeles, who are unionized and like it that way; and noncharter neighborhood public schools, like PS 83 in East Harlem and the George Hall Elementary School in Mobile, Alabama, that are nationally recognized for successfully educating poor children. You don't see teen moms, households without an adult English speaker or headed by a drug addict, or any of the millions of children who never have a chance to enter a charter school lottery (or get help with their homework or a nice breakfast) because adults simply aren't engaged in their education. These children, of course, are often the ones who are most difficult to educate, and the ones neighborhood public schools can't turn away.

You also don't learn that in the Finnish education system, much cited in the film as the best in the world, teachers are—gasp!—unionized and granted tenure, and families benefit from a cradle-to-grave social welfare system that includes universal daycare, preschool and healthcare, all of which are proven to help children achieve better results at school.

In other words, *Waiting for Superman* is a moving but vastly oversimplified brief on American educational inequality. Nevertheless, it has been greeted by rapturous reviews.

"Can One Little Movie Save America's Schools?" asked the cover of *New York* magazine. On September 20 *The Oprah Winfrey Show* featured the film's director, Davis Guggenheim, of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Tom Friedman of the *New York Times* devoted a column to praising the film. *Time* published an education issue coinciding with the documentary's release and is planning a conference built in part around the school reform strategies the film endorses. NBC, too, will host an education reform conference in late September; *Waiting for Superman* will be screened and debated there, and many of the reformers involved in its production will be there. *Katie Couric of CBS Evening News* has promised a series of segments based on the movie.

Meanwhile, mega-philanthropist Bill Gates, who appears in *Waiting for Superman*, hit the road in early September to promote the film; while he was at it, he told an audience at the Toronto International Film Festival that school districts should cut pension payments for retired teachers. Other players in the free-market school reform movement, most of whom had seen the documentary at early screenings for opinion leaders and policy-makers, anticipated its September 24 release with cautious optimism.

The media excitement around the film "is beginning to open up an overdue public conversation," says Amy Wilkins, vice president at the Washington advocacy group Education Trust. "Do I think the coverage is always elegant and superior and perfect? No. Of course there is going to be some stumbling and stumbling. But the fact that the film is provoking this conversation is really important for teachers and kids."

Indeed, a tense public sparring match over the achievement gap, unions and the future of the teaching profession is already under way. In August the *Los Angeles Times* defied the protests of unions and many education policy experts by publishing a searchable online database of elementary school teachers' effectiveness rankings. The newspaper's calculations were made using a new statistical method called value-added measurement, which is based on children's standardized test scores and which social scientists across the political spectrum agree is volatile and often flawed.

In Washington, Mayor Adrian Fenty lost his re-election bid in part because of black voters' skepticism toward his aggressive school reform efforts, led by lightning-rod schools chancellor Michelle Rhee, who pursued an agenda of closing troubled neighborhood schools, instituting a privately

funded merit-pay program for teachers and firing teachers and principals deemed ineffective. And at the federal level, **President Obama's signature education program, the Race to the Top grant competition, pressures states to implement many of the most controversial teacher reforms, including merit pay based on value-added measurement.**

Yet under the radar of this polarized debate, union affiliates across the country are coming to the table to talk about effective teaching in a more meaningful way than they ever have before. These stories of cooperation, from Pittsburgh to Memphis, are rarely being told, in part because national union leaders are worried about vocally stepping out beyond their members, and in part because of the media's tendency to finger-point at organized labor.

Singling out teachers is a central strategy for shifting the debate away from the public role of education. Those concerned with this trend worry that the end result of these strategies is the collapse of education as a public good. The concern for equality and civil rights has become increasingly pronounced.

Pedro Noguera, professor of sociology at New York University, & Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at City University of New York, April 22, 2011, NPR, "The Nation: Teachers Are Not The Enemy" <http://www.npr.org/2011/04/22/135628478/the-nation-teachers-are-not-the-enemy>

Public school teachers and their unions are under a sustained assault that is still unfolding. In 2010 Michelle Rhee, former Washington, DC, schools chancellor, announced the creation of a multimillion-dollar lobbying organization for the explicit purpose of undermining teachers unions. She has charged that "bad teachers" are the primary cause of the problems that beset America's schools. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has asserted that effective teachers need no experience. Romanticizing the young, energetic, passionate (read: cheap) teacher, he has made eliminating seniority preferences in layoffs (aka, last in, first out — or LIFO) his pet cause (it has been stymied for the time being by the state legislature).

New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has slashed school aid by \$1.2 billion while refusing to comply with a court-mandated formula for school funding equity. He has become a right-wing hero by demonizing teachers, lambasting unions, challenging tenure rights and introducing a crude teacher-evaluation process based on student test scores. Christie is also pushing what he calls a "final solution" — \$360 million in tax credits for a tuition voucher system that would permit any child in New Jersey go to any school, public or private, and would include state subsidies for some students already attending parochial schools and yeshivas.

It's hard to think of another field in which experience is considered a liability and those who know the least about the nuts and bolts of an enterprise are embraced as experts.

The attack has diverse roots, and comes not only from Republicans. Groups like Democrats for Education Reform have dedicated substantial resources to undermining teachers unions. With Race to the Top, the Obama administration has put its weight behind a reform agenda featuring charter schools, which employ mostly nonunion labor, as its centerpiece. A disturbing bipartisan consensus is emerging that favors a market model for public schools that would abandon America's historic commitment to providing education to all children as a civil right. This model would make opportunities available largely to those motivated and able to leave local schools; treat parents as consumers and children as disposable commodities that can be judged by their test scores; and unravel collective bargaining agreements so that experienced teachers can be replaced with fungible itinerant workers who have little training, less experience and no long-term commitment to the profession.

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Education policy is more prominent and more controversial than it was in 2010. The prospect of imminent federal legislative reform ensures that education will continue to be a significant policy controversy. Nothing in these efforts provides any evidence that market solutions will experience a reduced role in education policy. I am resubmitting the education controversy paper because I feel it offers a rich opportunity for debate. Debaters will be able to draw upon their own experiences as students who have been exposed to the teacher and student evaluation era as well as a deep policy literature to engage these questions. Education policy remains an incredibly important subject and the intercollegiate community would do well to consider selecting it as a year-long topic.