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Schools In American Cities

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Reforming Tenure and the Teaching Profession

According to Davis Guggenheim, good teachers are the key to improving the public education system. Guggenheim focuses heavily on the tenure system and its faults in the documentary *Waiting for “Superman”*, but fails to present a viable alternative to the system already in place. Replacing poorly performing teachers with competent, compassionate, and effective teachers is critical to changing the public education system, and addressing this issue requires both transactional and transformational change at the district and national levels. Reforming the tenure process to make it more selective and rigorous and changing societal views of the teaching profession will help to ensure that high quality teachers are in the classroom.

Transactional changes must be coupled with transformational changes in order to affect change in public education. “Transactional change refers to discrete reforms in policy, practice, or program” whereas transformational change “refers to changes in the way people think and act within or across a range of institutions” (Warren 8). Transactional change without transformational change still leaves plenty of room for race and class based discrimination, but changing mindsets without revising procedures and creating policies that reflect those changes also has a limited impact. Thus, both forms of change are extremely important to reforming the public education system, and can be applied at all levels of the system.

The current tenure system is ineffective at regulating teacher quality, but getting rid of tenure is also problematic. Currently, teachers gain tenure through a straightforward process and then can only be removed through a very difficult, time-consuming one. The United Federation of Teachers assures new teachers that “the process for determining whether or not you will get tenure is rigorous, and tenure is not automatic at the end of the probationary period”, but the American Federation of Teachers qualifies that statement, acknowledging that “tenure decisions are often made on the fly, by ill-prepared principals without the time or the expertise to make informed judgments” ("Tenure for Newer Teachers", "Teacher Development and Evaluation"). Even though tenure decisions are supposed to be made thoughtfully, they often are not, which means that ineffective, incompetent teachers who maybe should not get tenure frequently do. But the tenure system is not entirely bad. Teachers need job security and the pedagogical freedom it provides them, so doing away with tenure altogether is also not ideal. Without tenure, teachers’ pay and continued employment would be based on some “objective” measure like student achievement, which is a problematic system because it relies on the assumption that the teacher is the sole factor that influences students’ academic performance when in reality this is impacted by numerous factors including, but not limited to, poverty, socioeconomic status, and race. Former Washington D.C. superintendent Michelle Rhee attempted to strike a balance between the tenure system and no tenure with a proposal that allows teachers to individually choose between tenure with lower pay and no tenure with a much higher salary and yearly evaluations and student test scores determining whether or not they keep their jobs (Haynes). While this plan is reasonable in that it allows each teacher to choose for him or herself which system they prefer and provides strong motivation to forgo tenure, it still cannot keep bad teachers from staying in the classroom by hiding within the tenure system. Perhaps the bigger issue with Rhee’s proposal was that the union leaders would not permit members to vote on it since they found it so unappealing (Waiting for “Superman”). Neither the current tenure system, the complete abolition of that system, or even a middle ground option seem to be feasible and effective ways to ensure teacher quality, so other reforms are necessary.

A tenure system that incorporates more accountability should be implemented. Making teaching more selective through increased education requirements would help ensure high quality teachers. Currently, there are various ways to be certified to teach, and not all involve adequate preparation. For instance, Teach For America members have nothing more than a bachelor’s degree and a five-week training course before they are sent into schools around the country (Crawford-Garrett 68-69). Having such low standards of entry means that not all teachers know how to teach and lowers the time and energy investment necessary to become a teacher, resulting in a lack of commitment to teaching as shown by the high rate of turnover in the field. In the US, “many teachers leave—up to 40 to 50 percent—in their first five years as teachers” (Ravitch). This lack of a commitment to teaching presents a problem in maintaining a workforce of high quality educators. As Gloria Ladson-Billings points out, “Our responsibility to students is not just for the nine months from September to June. It is a long term commitment, not just to the students but also to society” (175). Good teaching requires a commitment to the future, more than just five years. Teachers who stay in the profession are not necessarily better than those who leave within the first five years, but their commitment implies that they have a strong desire to teach, which does make a difference in the quality of their teaching. Raising requirements to enter teaching helps ensure that people who do become teachers are well prepared and truly committed to teaching.

Second, tenure should initially be more difficult to obtain than it currently is. While the process of obtaining tenure is theoretically rigorous, in practice it generally is not ("Teacher Development and Evaluation"). The responsibility of evaluating a new teacher for tenure and deciding whether or not to award it should not rest in the hands of a single principal or even a group of administrators. Principals and administrators vary in their experience levels and distance from the classroom and therefore may not be able to adequately evaluate teachers. Instead, new teachers seeking tenure should also be observed by their peers and evaluated by their students. Other teachers in the same school or district spend vastly more time in the classroom than administrators do and thus are better able to understand the nuances and subtleties that make a teacher good and effective than inexperienced principals. Ideally, the observer would be a veteran tenured teacher, or several teachers of various experience levels could individually observe a tenure-track teacher to counter any potential biases. This panel of observers could include teachers from other district schools or teachers from the same school. Since collaboration and community among teachers is important for teacher development, having teachers from the same school serve as observers allows for aspiring teachers to be evaluated on community fit as well as performance. Only awarding tenure to teachers who fit with the values and community of the school affords administrators more freedom in determining the direction of the school and hopefully would lend itself to a positive work environment and more collaboration for all teachers in the school.

Students’ opinions should also be taken into account when deciding whether or not a teacher is granted tenure. Students are the ones who have the most interaction with teachers and are most directly affected by the teacher, so it makes sense that they should have a say in whether or not tenure is granted. Even young students have a sense of the quality of their teacher, though they may not be able to name what behaviors and characteristics make a teacher good or bad. Although students’ opinions could be discounted as unreliable or biased by their personal relationship with a teacher, they should be viewed as legitimate since a teacher’s rapport with students impacts their effectiveness as an educator. Balancing student evaluations with the observations of professionals provides a more complete picture of a prospective teacher’s aptitude.

Since it takes time to become a good teacher, teachers seeking tenure should be allowed to choose after how many years they are evaluated, with some constraints. If a teacher feels that they are a ready for evaluation after three years, they should be evaluated then. If not, they can postpone the process by a year or two. Five years would be a suitable cap. Teachers without tenure are not entitled to due process, so new teachers would be motivated to obtain tenure, but also would not be pressured to do so before they feel ready.

Every five or ten years after a teacher’s initial earning of tenure they should be reevaluated through a much less rigorous but still comprehensive process including observation by another teacher or administrator and student evaluations. The renewal of their tenure should be contingent on this evaluation. It is important that teachers continue to be effective and competent after they are tenured. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as demonstrated by the two veteran fourth grade teachers at Washington Elementary in Union City who refuse to change their teaching style and were less engaging and effective teachers because of it (Kirp 69-71). Thus it is important to check that teachers who were good teachers when they started out have not regressed due to burn out or an inability or refusal to change their methods over time to fit changing student needs.

Of course, reforming the tenure system means nothing if there are not qualified, properly educated people who want to be teachers. One factor that discourages smart, qualified people from entering teaching is the low status the profession hold in our society. It is viewed as simple work that requires little skill and intelligence, as evidenced by the saying, “Those who can’t do, teach”. This saying suggests that teachers are the leftovers, those who were not good enough for other professions, and therefore are inferior to other workers. The low status teaching holds in society is reflected by the lack of training required to become a teacher. Diane Ravitch claims the low status of teaching in the United States, in comparison to the high regard the profession is given in other countries, is a key factor in the lack of quality teachers. She notes the success of the Finnish education system and writes, “In Finland [teaching] is highly esteemed; in the United States it is not” (Ravitch). If Ravitch is correct in linking the status of a countries teachers and its academic success, then by shifting public perceptions of teaching and teachers, it may be possible to improve the quality of the teachers entering the profession and by extension the academic achievement of students. Unlike transactional changes though, transformational changes like this are not easy or quick to enact. One way to encourage transformational change is to enact transactional changes that are in line with the transformational shift. In the case of changing societal views of teaching, making policy changes that place greater emphasis on education is a good way to start. This might mean allocating more funds to public education, even if it means making cuts in other areas of the budget, or making sure that schools have adequate facilities, resources, and staff. When we craft policies that make education a priority, it sends the message that education is an important and serious business, which in turn elevates the status of educators as their work is increasingly seen as legitimate and necessary.

Making changes at the district and national levels is important, but the classroom is still where teachers matter most. At the classroom level, changing the way teachers think about their students and pedagogy will improve the quality of education. There needs to be shift in teacher mindsets from deficit thinking to thinking of students as competent individuals who bring their own knowledge and perspectives to the classroom. Teachers also need to recognize and be critical of their own biases and avoid race, gender, and class based expectations of students. Bringing about changes like these in the future starts today by educating students to be open-minded critical thinkers and by changing the systems that perpetuate racism and poverty in society. Given the importance of high quality teaching to improving the public education system as a whole, we should implement a tenure system that involves a rigorous initial evaluation including student feedback as well as enact policies that will raise the status of teachers and education and change public perception of them.

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