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Want to Appreciate Teachers? Reward Them With Merit Pay

By Sarah Longwell

MANY Americans celebrated Teacher Appreciation Week last week with ceremonies and accolades for our many outstanding educators.

In fact, most teachers are great — richly deserving not only of our praise but of compensation commensurate with their skills. Unfortunately, teachers unions are holding them back, paying them according to tenure, not ability, in the name of “fairness.”

In Washington, D.C., and in school districts across the country, the result is a political climate where we can't put our money where our mouths are.

Our words of appreciation will always ring hollow if unions succeed in preventing us from using pay to show our appreciation for teachers' merit.

It's no offense to good teachers to be critical of a system that insulates bad teachers from accountability. What's offensive is acting as if rewarding merit isn't worth the risk of ruffling union feathers.

A spate of recent stories has shown unions to be more devoted to shielding poor teachers from firing and criticism than paying well for teachers who teach well. Unions in New York and California have even battled tooth and nail against allowing the public to learn public school teachers' evaluation scores.

In fact, in many major cities, only one out of 1,000 teachers is fired for performance-related reasons. In comparison, 1 out of every 57 doctors loses his or her license to practice medicine,

and 1 out of every 97 lawyers loses his or her license to practice law. Why such low turnover for teachers?

The president of one Nevada union recently characterized tenure as a human right! No wonder we've begun to hear of students taking it upon themselves to protest against failing teachers. Unions guarantee it's virtually impossible to fire a teacher, no matter how incompetent or unfit.

When the worst teachers are pulled from classrooms, unions often force school districts to pay them while they sit around and do nothing until the charges against them are heard and resolved — a process that often seems like an eternity. In New York City alone, districts spend more than \$100 million every year paying teachers who have been “excessed” but have yet to find jobs.

The truth is, unions treat an attack on bad teachers as an attack on themselves. The unions are so worried about losing control that, under the pretext of fairness, they've put teachers in the unfair position of having to defend a tenure system that doesn't serve their careers or support their integrity. Unless tenure is replaced with a pay system based on ability, teachers unions will continue to ensure that appreciating teachers never becomes anything more than well-intentioned lip service.

It's difficult to entice the unions to give up tenure and allow teachers to earn more money. In Washington, D.C., school chancellor Michelle Rhee proposed a

voluntary two-tier track for teachers. On one tier teachers could maintain regular raises and keep their tenure. On the other track, teachers could give up tenure and be paid according to how well they and their students performed with the potential to earn as much as \$140,000 per year. The union wouldn't even let that proposal come up for a vote, however, stubbornly blocking efforts to ratify a new contract for more than three years.

Sadly, the teachers union leaders don't seem to grasp that doing away with their brittle, self-defeating tenure system will not only strengthen America's teachers but revitalize the unions teachers choose to represent them. Today's bad teachers have given today's unions a bad name; worse, today's bad unions are giving the American education system, as a whole, a bad reputation. We've become trapped in a vicious circle of underachievement and excuse-making, all so that our worst teachers can be more comfortable — and union leaders more powerful — than they deserve.

Those unearned privileges are hardly worth the chronic under-appreciation we're showing our great teachers. It's time to live up to our own ideals and replace the tenure system with merit pay — rewarding our outstanding teachers all year long in a tangible way, rather than a feel-good pat on the back one week a year.

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