

Written BY Bill Lama

Is "Teaching Profession" an Oxymoron?

"At a time when disappointing student performance, stark achievement gaps, and an ever-*flattening* world call for retooling American schools for the 21st century, the most daunting impediments to doing so are the teacher collective bargaining agreements that regulate virtually all aspects of school district operations." Thus begins an important new report by **Frederick M. Hess** of the right-leaning *American Enterprise Institute* and **Martin R. West** of the left-leaning *The Brookings Institution*.

A Better Bargain: Overhauling Teacher Collective Bargaining for the 21st Century lays out one piece of the strategy for fixing our under performing schools. Living in Palos Verdes, it is tempting to think that the real problems are down the hill in the LAUSD. Up here there is a raging battle over the number of hours kids spend in kindergarten. The present schedule has an overlap of morning and afternoon sessions that allows for significant savings in salaries and classroom space. The Teacher's Union wants to eliminate the overlap, and the savings, for the sake of the kids. Is it true that kindergarten class size must be reduced or is this another case of *no-teacher left behind?*

A letter to the editor of the *Palos Verdes Peninsula News* pleads for the change: "The rigorous, chaotic schedule our kindergartners are subjected to is astounding." I have to ask, why *rigorous?* Why *chaotic?* Kids are *subjected to?* These are five year olds. What are they doing to our kids in kindergarten? It seems that the problems are everywhere.

Apple CEO **Steve Jobs** lambasted teacher's unions last week at an education reform conference. In a discussion of technology in the classroom (what else?), Jobs shocked the audience by saying no amount of technology in the classroom would improve public schools *until principals could fire bad teachers*.

Jobs compared schools to businesses with principals serving as CEOs.

"What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them that when they came in they couldn't get rid of people that they thought weren't any good?" he asked.

"Not really great ones because if you're really smart you go, 'I can't win.'"

Mr. Jobs elaborated on the source of the problem.

"I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way," Jobs said. "This unionization and lifetime employment of K-12 teachers is off-the-charts crazy."

Hey, what does Steve Jobs know?

***Hess** and **West** note that "teacher collective bargaining agreements are vestiges of the industrial economic model that prevailed in the 1950s, when assembly-line workers and low-level managers were valued less for their knowledge or technical skills than for their longevity." At a time when effective teachers are demanding to be treated as respected professionals, teacher unions are an anachronism.*

Hess and West also spread the blame to the superintendents and school boards who sign off on the union contracts.

A Better Bargain charts a new course, recommending five key changes in collective bargaining agreements:

1. Teacher pay should reflect the scarcity and value of teachers' skills, the difficulty of their assignments, the extent of their responsibilities, and the caliber of their work. Pay for value.

2. Pension and health benefits should be like the rest of us get (if we're lucky), which will entail shifting to defined-contribution plans better suited to the new economy and a professional workforce.

3. Tenure should be eliminated from K-12 schooling. (See Steve Jobs.)

4. Personnel should be assigned to schools on the basis of educational need rather than seniority.

5. Work rules should be weeded out of contracts, and contracts should explicitly define managerial prerogatives. Principals need to be CEOs.

These necessary changes are only feasible in conjunction with a reform strategy committed to a world-class K-12 education system based on principles of accountability, competition and transparency.

Accountability: *Results-based accountability is needed throughout the system, from administrators to teachers. One key step is the construction of reliable statewide databases that track individual students' academic progress over time so that teacher pay and professional development can be linked to classroom effectiveness.*

Choice and Competition: *Enhanced school choice and competition are essential to heighten incentives to improve student performance. In particular, state officials should eliminate obstacles to the creation of charter schools that operate free from many statutory and contractual restrictions.*

Tough-Minded Governance: *District officials must shine light on inefficient contract provisions, push for fundamental changes in contract language, and fully exploit permissive or ambiguous language where it exists. In addition, civic leaders and citizens must support management practices that may create, at least initially, disgruntled unions and increased labor unrest.*

Mayor Mike Bloomberg of New York believes "the desire to learn has disappeared down the bottomless well of centralized urban public-school bureaucracies." Bloomberg proposed greatly increased autonomy for school principals, and he wants teachers to prove they deserve tenure, an idea so obvious that it probably has no chance. The liberal mayor of America's biggest city is willing to preserve tenure (a bad idea) but has no chance of introducing reasonable accountability.

American K-12 education is a monolithic, over-regulated yet over-protected system with dysfunction in every major subsystem. In my post "NO Child Left Behind" (2/3/07), the capabilities and responsibilities of the students were highlighted. The kids and their parents have primary responsibility for learning, but we spend a substantial portion of our government budgets on teachers who need to hold up their end.

It is about time for the many fine teachers to stand up and demand to be treated like professionals with requisite rewards and accountability. It is past time for the few under performing teachers to find other employment.

And it is time for the elected school boards and the PTAs to join together and demand accountability, excellence and fiscal responsibility in this most critical profession. America's future depends on it.
