

# Common Ground on the Transformation of Teaching?

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*It turns out that I have a pretty good place to collect my thoughts about the transformation of teaching in America. For the last four days, I have been traveling with a group of about 40 Americans looking at Finland's schools. Their students perform among the best in the world on PISA, they spend less time in school than we do, and actually start formal schooling a year after us. So, how do they do it?*

Finland does a number of things to support their children well, but one of the big factors is that they have strong teachers. With the US drifting down the international depth chart of educational performance, what can reformers and teachers do to ensure we learn from the world's best and transform our teaching profession in a way that makes sense for an American context?

Before discussing what needs to change, it's important to discuss how these shifts might occur. There are at least two schools of thought. The education reformers, many of whom are represented in the Policy Innovation in Education consortium (PIE), are pushing to change the system from the outside. Likewise, there is a movement from within the system, particularly among the teacher ranks (what some have called the new unionists) to take ownership of the transformation.

Central to both efforts is a belief that every child deserves a great teacher and a world-class education. With limited time and political capital, the question this brief begins to address is what are the critical policy shifts necessary to elegantly and efficiently move the system?

Both camps—the unionists and reformers—bring potent power to the table and both face significant challenges. The reformers are gaining traction on several fronts, but are the levers they/we are trying

to pull the right ones? The new unionists are gaining momentum as well, but can they move fast enough to turn the tide? Is there a way we can together to build greater synergy?

In many ways, the reformers have unprecedented influence. Our US Secretary of Education, the chief state school officers in many of our largest states, and leaders in many of our major urban centers are in agreement about a reform agenda that in broad strokes includes higher standards, accountability to those standards, and a push for innovation and choice. Versions of this agenda are often accelerated by philanthropic engines, like several of the major national foundations and much smaller foundations like the one I run.

## Reformers' dilemma

The reformer's agenda has forced some fundamental ideas to be part of the conversation. Though imperfect, No Child Left Behind made clear that the performance of all kids matters. With Race to the Top, higher standards were encouraged and new teacher and leader performance metrics were introduced that are beginning to catalyze important conversations around the quality of instruction and the distribution of that quality relative to the needs of our students. Beyond government, education advocacy organizations (EAOs) across the country have worked to inspire significant policy shifts designed to strengthen the quality of classroom teachers, such as eliminating "last in, first out" laws so that high performing young teachers don't get laid off because they lack seniority.

By and large, the reformers have moved the field in a positive direction but there are times, as in the case of teacher evaluation, when the rhetoric has gotten out farther than the reality of what is possible. False starts waste scarce financial and

political capital so, as we move forward, we need to be thoughtful about where we can gain the most traction.

Moreover, teachers in the field have been slow to buy into this reform agenda. At the end of the day, a critical mass of educators need to own these ideas if they are going to stick. (This past spring, international education leaders gathered in New York to discuss the state of education and affectionately framed the reform movement as GERM, or Global Education Reform Movement<sup>1</sup>.)

One could dismiss this concern as the natural pushback of any established bureaucracy against change, but until teachers believe that the changes being proposed make sense, the culture will not change.

### Unions' challenge

Most would acknowledge that, historically, organized labor has been essential to establishing fair wages and acceptable working conditions when neither existed, and it has amassed unprecedented power among our elected officials at all levels of government. Our teachers' unions have not only helped teachers, they have established themselves as powerful players in the political ecosystem.

However, as they have amassed strength and size, they have often become slow to change. This reluctance to change has put the teachers unions in a compromised position nationally. As Maddie Fennell, Nebraska Teacher of the Year, panelist at PIE, and contributing author of the NEA's "Transforming Teaching: Connecting Professional Responsibility with Student Learning," points out, the unions are facing major challenges and need to "...either build an airbag to soften the fall or an airplane to take us to new heights."

So, despite the important work unions have done over time, the unions and the teachers within them need to respond to a rapidly changing landscape. It is an open question as to how that response will play out.

### What are we shooting for?

The good news is that, as a nation, there may be a growing consensus in terms of *what* we need to do

to transform the teaching profession.

When we look at the McKinsey analysis on how high performing countries moved up the performance continuum<sup>2</sup>, we see that in the countries designated "poor" to "fair," there were no consistent criteria for entry into the teaching profession, and the measures of performance were virtually nonexistent. In those countries that met the "good" criteria, there were clear criteria for entering the profession, performance was measured largely in a top-down fashion, and there were limited career pathways. And in the "excellent" systems, we see extremely rigorous selection and training (e.g. the Finns only select from the top ten percent of college applicants and then fully subsidize their schooling), strong commitment to the profession over time, clear measures of performance that are largely enforced by the teachers themselves—from the bottom up versus the top down—and teachers have more school-level autonomy and a career path that enables them to excel in the classroom or as an administrator.

In my estimation, many of our states, including my home state, Delaware, are someplace in that middle stage of "good." There are individual schools that span the spectrum but, by and large, our states are moving toward building the policy infrastructure to manage performance over time.

However, as we move toward "excellence," my hope is that teachers and reformers can find some common ground as to how we get there.

### Common ground

In the last two years, much of the state-level debate has been focused on crafting fair evaluations of existing teachers. If done well, this could open the door to identifying new career paths, determine where extra help is needed, and weed out those for whom the profession is not a good fit. However, despite these potential benefits, teacher evaluation policies have become mired in complex technical debates, strained some already fragile teacher-administrative relationships and may, in fact, not be addressing the most meaty problems.

At our session, Arthur McKee, from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is going to

provide some context on how we might be able to dramatically improve the quality of teaching by squarely addressing teacher preparation.

This is a place where reformers and teachers should be able to agree.

Arthur's overview of teacher preparation programs will provide a high level look at the NCTQ/ US News & World Report and touch upon whether:

- Teacher preparation programs select academically capable people
- They adequately support teachers in determining what and how to teach
- The candidates get a high quality hands-on experience
- Their graduates have an impact on student learning

With over 1,400 institutions of higher education preparing teachers, this is a place where significant changes could fundamentally change the conversation.

In addition to the critical issues of how potential teachers are recruited and prepared, Maddie Fennell will lead us in a discussion of a range of issues surfaced in a recent NEA report on the transformation of teaching, including:

- The culture of teaching
- How teachers are evaluated, retained, and dismissed
- How professional development is aligned to student learning
- How the professional continuum and compensation could be re-imagined

The fact that the NEA has engaged in this self-reflection should be lauded and leveraged. Each of the topics above are complex, but my hope is that this discussion is the start of an important reframing of how and what we can do to transform the teaching profession.

As we move forward in this work, I hope we keep the rigor of countries like Finland in mind. The culture and demographics in Helsinki are vastly different than the US but, as a Delaware teacher who joined me on the trip shared, one element the Finns have built over time is "trust." Trust is in slim

supply in the United States today. In Finland, that trust was earned by crafting a system in which only the top ten percent of college graduates teach and by demonstrating consistently high results year over year. My hope is that this conversation in Minnesota catalyzes a set of new discussions nationally about how we can begin to rebuild the trust necessary to move toward the excellence I believe this country can reclaim.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-germ-is-infecting-schools-around-the-world/2012/06/29/gJQAVELZAW\\_blog.html#pagebreak](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-germ-is-infecting-schools-around-the-world/2012/06/29/gJQAVELZAW_blog.html#pagebreak)

<sup>2</sup> Barber, M., Chijioke, C., & Mourshed, M. (2010). How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better. McKinsey & Company.