

DC's Step Forward, NY's Step Back

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Something stunning happened this week in Congress. The Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee voted 22-0 to overhaul No Child Left Behind. That's right, policymakers from Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky) to Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) listened to the people they're sworn to represent and found common ground on public education.

Sens. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Patty Murray (D-Wash.) led the charge. They're the ultimate Odd Couple—he served as President George H. W. Bush's secretary of education; she was known as the “mom in tennis shoes” who entered politics to save her local preschool.

We need leaders willing to look past ideology, listen to those closest to the classroom and find common ground.

Together, they listened to business leaders, community partners, civil rights activists, parents and educators—including nearly 20,000 AFT members. Overwhelmingly, the message was: Instead of obsessing over test scores, let's give our students what they need to climb the ladder of opportunity and succeed. Schools should be places of learning and joy, not testing and agita. And, let's give our teachers the latitude, supports and resources necessary to do their jobs well.

The outcome is promising: While not perfect—no compromise is—their bill restores the original intent of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as NCLB was first known, to address poverty and educational inequality with targeted funding for poor children. It moves away from the counterproductive focus on sanctions and high-stakes tests, and ends federalized teacher evaluations and school closings.

Meanwhile, in New York, Gov. Andrew Cuomo is going down a different (albeit well-worn) path, ramming through ideology as part of his budget, ignoring those closest to the classroom.

Across the state, students, teachers, parents and community members pleaded with the governor to listen to their concerns and visit their schools. Sixty public forums were held. Thousands rallied. But the governor refused to listen. He hasn't visited a public school in his second term. It just seems he won't have an honest conversation about what New York's children and families are facing.

Systemic underfunding is denying generations of New York students their right to a sound basic education. Local communities have gone through tough economic times. The courts have said that the state owes schools in high-need districts 2.3 times more in per-pupil funding than schools in wealthy districts. Yet Gov. Cuomo fails to close this gap, which is among the worst in the nation. At the same time, New York schools are the most segregated in the nation, another issue that the governor ignores.

Instead, the governor, who's really too smart to operate in an evidence-free zone, has bought into his hedge fund backers' idea: that the correlation between teachers and their students' test scores is the only thing that matters. We saw this idea play out in NCLB and Race to the Top, where the over-reliance on high-stakes testing may not have been the intention, but it's been the end result.

Pretty much everyone agrees that it hasn't worked. And it's no wonder: As important a role as teachers play, they ultimately account for 10 percent of the variance in test scores, according to economists. But while most policymakers are trying to strike a new balance by addressing the other 90 percent, Gov. Cuomo is doubling down on testing and sanctions.

Thankfully, the state Assembly and some in the state Senate have stuck to their values, fighting for more funding and moving some decisions to the Board of Regents, a board with educational

expertise. Still, the governor's actions are just plain wrong. New Yorkers, who, despite their calls to curb sanctions, despite already being put through the ringer with the fixation on high-stakes testing, continue to be ignored. That's why we're seeing so many parents choose to opt their children out of these tests.

I've worked in public education for 30 years—as a teacher, a lawyer and union leader. I've visited hundreds of schools and districts. I've seen leaders from the classroom to the national stage who have been willing to set aside their differences and do the hard work that's necessary to create real, enduring change.

It might be surprising that this kind of leadership is wilting in a state like New York, while blooming in the most unlikely of places: Congress. The U.S. Senate bill represents an important step forward and the most positive development we've seen in public education policy in years—because of both the bill's content and the committee's very intentional move to leave partisanship and politics at the door.

There's no silver bullet when it comes to helping all children achieve. Great public schools are our best shot. But until we have more leaders willing to look past ideology, listen to those closest to the classroom and find common ground, we won't move forward. And, in a welcome change, it's the U.S. Senate that has shown us what's possible.



AFT President Randi Weingarten joins New York teachers for a recent rally in Manhattan outside Gov. Cuomo's office.

PHOTO: AFT staff

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