

Tuning in to Teachers

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Why would 3,500 people go to sun- and fun-filled Los Angeles and opt to spend the bulk of their time inside a cavernous convention hall? To be heard. This was the case last week at the American Federation of Teachers biennial convention, where educators spoke up forcefully and passionately about economic and social justice, education and professional issues on which they are often denied a voice.

These days, the wisdom and experience of educators are often ignored and, worse, dismissed by policymakers who favor approaches emanating far from the classroom. Yet no one is better able to weigh in on what will help children succeed academically than educators, who have incomparable firsthand knowledge. That's exactly what AFT delegates did—setting union policies for how to reclaim the promise of public education—for our kids, families and communities.

AFT's new policy revamping accountability is perhaps the most important because it confronts the destructive obsession with standardized testing.

Educators didn't simply rail against the harmful effects of "test-and-punish" accountability systems driven by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top; they gave near-unanimous approval to a new approach aimed at ensuring kids have meaningful learning outcomes—based on a systemic support-and-improve model that holds to account all who have responsibility for education.

The most intense debate concerned the Common Core State Standards. Teachers have been told that these are an essential building block to help all students be ready for college and career, yet stories of inadequate resources and preparation for teachers and students were as legion as they were heartbreaking. The anger over the emphasis on testing and the profit-seeking developers of tests and textbooks as well as other "edupreneurs" was evident and justified.

That's why some who object to the standards believe that they are being used to set up public education, kids and teachers for failure. Even with all

of this, supporters said the standards—when properly resourced and supported—develop deeper learning, and help disrupt educational inequities by making essential skills and knowledge available to all children.

The passionate debate ended with two-thirds of the delegates in support of the standards' potential, but calling for teachers and parents to have real input in their implementation; for officials to be held accountable for proper implementation; and reaffirming the call the AFT started in April 2013 for a moratorium on the high-stakes consequences of Common Core-aligned assessments until the new accountability system envisioned here is in place. Officials who say they believe in the Common Core should heed these commonsense actions.

These debates about accountability and standards show why the California judge who recently stripped teachers' due-process rights was so wrong. Educators not only should be heard on the floor of a convention, they also need their voices to be respected in their schools and by policymakers.

AFT delegates strongly stated that due process is not a shield to cloak incompetence, nor an excuse for managers not to manage. When I addressed the convention and said that no teacher wants to work alongside someone not cut out for this demanding profession, it was met with applause.

Due process gives teachers professional latitude, such as to use scenes from the movie "Mean Girls" to help teach the power dynamics of "Julius Caesar," as one teacher has. It enables educators

to fight for their students' needs. It protects people such as the former Teacher of the Year who was told to remain silent about her sexual orientation until she had tenure, and the teacher parents sought to remove from the classroom for teaching the California state curriculum on Islam. It's necessary to prevent reverting to a patronage system so that teachers' jobs do not depend on whom they know, but what they know.

Finally, it was no surprise to me that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was criticized for "misguided and ineffective policies on deprofessionalization, privatization and test obsession." Those policies have created a toxic climate for schools, kids, educators,

Educators' wisdom too often is snubbed by policies emanating far from the classroom.

parents and communities; but because we value both the potential to improve and due process, delegates called for Duncan to be placed on a "secretary improvement plan." If he does not improve, they resolved, "he must resign."

Too often education edicts come down from on high with a directive to "just do it," without question and without complaint. Educators' voices should be as welcome in the halls of power as they were in the halls of our convention. That is the lesson Secretary Duncan and others must learn if the goal truly is to strengthen America's public schools.



Weingarten speaking at the American Federation of Teachers convention in Los Angeles on July 11.

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