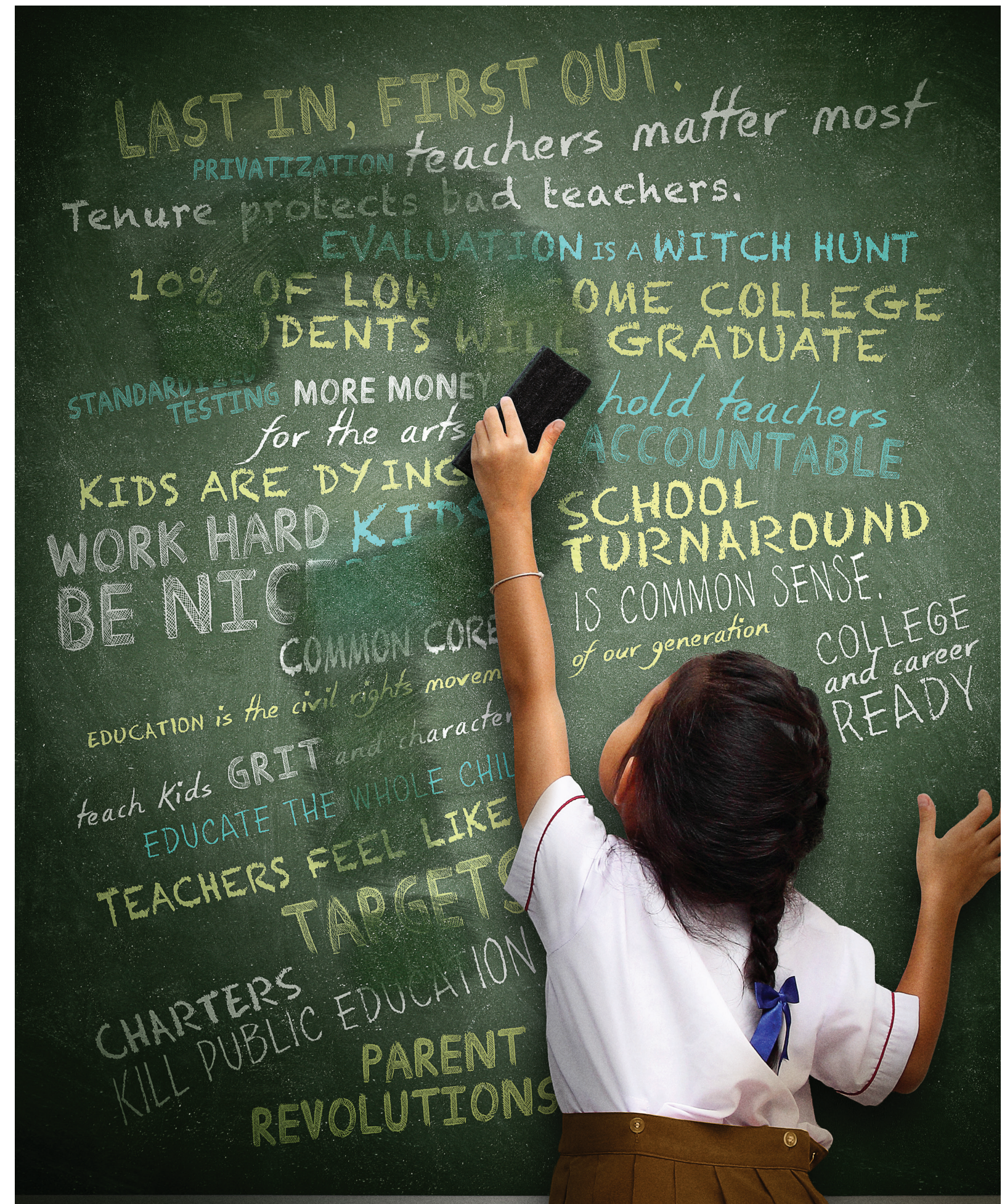


Edited by Ting Yu (N.Y. '03)
Photo illustration by Aaron Goodman

WHAT'S BEST For Kids

IT'S STRANGE HOW A PHRASE THAT SHOULD UNITE EDUCATORS CAN BE SO DIVISIVE. Used by reformers and critics alike, “what’s best for kids” has a way of turning up the contrast in education debates, giving the illusion that one side is fully in the right, and that complicated problems have clear-cut solutions. Yet education’s most contentious topics—charters, teacher evaluation, unions, standardized tests—are full of gray areas that are in desperate need of respectful debate. *One Day* invited 10 contributors to take on some of the toughest issues in education reform and to shine a light on their complexities as well as some questions and hard truths. Through their voices, we hope to flesh out a less-polarized understanding of education reform—one that isn’t equated with a specific set of policies or dogma, but instead is committed to continually reflecting and evolving to meet the needs of students and families.



Going Farther, Together

By Kaya Henderson (N.Y. '92)

Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools



Perhaps the hardest thing I've had to do as chancellor is close 15 DCPS schools. Schools are community institutions that do much more than teach children. Closing a school signifies a disinvestment of resources, the loss of a social and civic hub, and the dashing of long-standing traditions and relationships that hold communities together. It's a jarring process for all involved—students, families, staff members, neighbors, and even school district officials. But I knew for sure that redirecting the money being spent on under-enrolled schools and empty buildings was the only way to give our students and families the kind of academic offerings they truly deserved.

Having lived through a round of rancorous school closings in 2008 when I was deputy chancellor, I resolved to find a better way. Instead of releasing a final list of schools to be closed, as we did last time, we publicly shared all the data we

had considered and presented a proposal to the community.

We spent countless hours in one-on-one and large group meetings explaining to our constituents what we were trying to do and hearing suggestions on how to do it better. We met with community members in their living rooms and churches. Sometimes the conversations were rational and thoughtful. Sometimes they were angry and disruptive. Passion isn't neat and tidy, but we have to respect the passion that our constituents bring as we ask them to make difficult decisions with us to do better for their students. Through it all, I reminded myself that even though it was probably quicker and easier to walk in my authority and make unilateral decisions, we would come to better decisions if we made them with our stakeholders.

Based on what we heard, we made substantive changes to the proposal. We kept one under-enrolled middle school open—knowing it would never be filled to capacity—because keeping it open would prevent a group of rival neighborhoods from ending up in the same building. At the request of community members, we also combined a K-8 school that was proposed for closure with one of our highest-performing high schools, creating a new K-12 campus that has reinvigorated the community around their neighborhood school. Finally, we made sure that the savings from the closures went directly to the priorities demanded by our families and community members, ensuring equity of programming across the city, and guaranteeing regular access to art, music, physical education, foreign language classes, and libraries.

Parents who had initially railed against the plan thanked us for providing better academic offerings for their students. Even those who still disagreed appreciated that we had engaged with them. In the end, we enjoyed a smooth transition and have a stronger portfolio of schools. But more than that, the

community co-owned this very difficult process with DCPS and we made better decisions for our students together than we would have made on our own.

Reflecting on my two very different experiences with school closings, I thought of the many times I'd talked with colleagues in the education reform movement who couldn't figure out why their organizations weren't supported by the families with whom they work. These reformers were sure that once the community saw improved student achievement results, they would forgive our lack of collaboration. I'd seen many people without any connection to the communities they serve proclaim what families and students need without ever consulting them. And I'd watched education leaders who committed to the complex, difficult, and often slow work of meaningfully engaging families and students be dismissed as soft or not urgent enough.

Unfortunately, too many reformers see our families as problems to solve, not as talented minds or partners with a wealth of experience to help develop solutions. We look past the communities that we serve, when in fact, many of the answers lie within the very people we serve, if only we'd engage them.

There is no doubt that meaningful engagement and partnerships take work and time—often a lot. There is an African proverb, however, that says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” This work is difficult, and if we are to be successful, we must go farther than we've ever gone before to deliver a world-class education to our students. It's time for education reformers to stop going fast, alone, so we can go as far as possible, together.

Before becoming DCPS chancellor, Kaya Henderson served as deputy chancellor under Michelle Rhee (Baltimore '92) from 2007 to 2010.

Being Honest About Where We've Fallen Short

By Dacia Toll & Doug McCurry

Chief Executive Officers, Achievement First



Since Achievement First opened our first school 15 years ago, the willingness to confront brutal facts has been part of our DNA. We got a painful opportunity to practice that mindset when New York students took their first Common Core-aligned assessment last year. Statewide, only a third of students were proficient using this more rigorous bar. While Achievement First's results were higher, it was clear that we were not sufficiently preparing many of our students for the rigors of college and career.

Prior to Common Core, most state tests measured basic proficiency in reading and math, not critical thinking or conceptual understanding. Our students' strong performance on these exams gave us false security. Our long-term goal has always been to prepare students to graduate from college, but our de facto, short-term goal had become student mastery on low-level state tests.

Since then, we have been on an urgent

internal and external quest to better understand what true excellence looks like in action. We have been fortunate to learn from powerful examples at schools that pitched to a higher academic bar—notably Success Academy, YES Prep, and our own high schools—and those that expected more in terms of student ownership, like Summit Public Schools, High Tech High, and high-quality Montessori programs.

What we've learned is helping us chart a new path for our schools—one that we hope will broaden and deepen the scope of what our students should know and be able to do. It begins with accelerated academic expectations that embrace the rigor of the Common Core and Advanced Placement. It also requires cultivating the motivation, resilience, and independence students need to drive their own success. We need to give students the chance to have “I can't believe I got to do that” learning experiences—kindergartners extracting DNA from a strawberry, middle schoolers vying in national robotics competitions, and high school students taking MOOCs from top universities.

At our schools and at many others, it's time to acknowledge that our approach to teacher training—focused mostly on classroom management generic teaching techniques—is insufficient to take our students to the next level. We must invest significantly more in training and coaching teachers and leaders to facilitate a deeper intellectual engagement in the rigorous content they will teach, so that they can then push students to do the same. For us, that meant doubling the amount of training for teachers and leaders and requiring all of our facilitators to practice

and get feedback beforehand to make sure our sessions are high-quality.

Finally, we need to take on issues of diversity and inclusiveness that have driven a wedge between education reformers and the communities we serve. It is not as simple as hiring more people of color at all levels of our organizations—although we need to do this. We must also commit to using diversity and inclusiveness as a lens to strengthen our core work. We experienced this firsthand when school data revealed that we were relying far too heavily on suspension as a discipline tool, which then had real costs in terms of student identity, trust with families, and simply acting like the kind of organization we want to be. We focused on this last year and were able to reduce suspension rates by a third, but we have more work to do.

Together, education reformers must take these painful lessons and engage in the kind of aggressive, continuous improvement that defines our movement. At the same time, we also must seek out more disruptive innovation so that we are better positioned to take big leaps in the future. At Achievement First, we partnered with IDEO, a top design firm, to come up with an entirely new school approach—one that better leverages technology and all that we have learned from cognitive science, our students' families, and our colleagues across the country. Next fall, Achievement First will open two new schools that draw from this design thinking.

We are more humble than we were 15 years ago, but we are also more optimistic. Our students' prospects and our country's future depend on our collective ability to look in the mirror and tackle areas where we must improve—and to focus on the horizon of college readiness and invent new ways to get there.

Achievement First is a charter network of 29 schools serving more than 9,000 K-12 students in five cities.

Let's Stop Targeting Teachers

By Robert Jeffers (L.A. '02)

Teacher, Los Angeles Unified School District

Most traditional-district teachers I know find the education reform movement exclusionary. In the name of pursuing equitable education for all students, it's alienating its frontline advocates. Many teachers—even the most progressive—feel increasingly scapegoated and attacked for the ills of a social and educational system that lacks equality at its core.

Why? Rewind several years to when pundits and some reformers vigorously scrutinized tenure and accountability, squarely placing the responsibility for national academic failure or success on the shoulders of teachers. If teachers didn't back evaluation measures linked to test scores, they were cast as being afraid of accountability. Dichotomizing complex issues—and essentially pitting teachers against students—only widens the rift. Is it any surprise that many see “reformers” as targeting teachers as the primary source of dysfunction, on a quest to root out bad teachers as the most effective path to better schools?

I still believe more strongly than ever in teaching as a profession, the potential for change, and most importantly, in the students. I also believe in reform, but I hesitate to call myself a reformer, as many, both outside and inside education, feel the reform movement increasingly and disturbingly lacks the voices of current classroom teachers.

So, what do we do? We can start with acknowledging the complex-

ity inherent in fixing a bureaucratic system that spans 50 states and seeks to serve all children in a dynamic socioeconomic and political landscape. We can redefine education reform to involve teachers as equal participants, if not primary drivers, of change—rather than backseat passengers whose role is to offer a stamp of approval after substantive policies have been drafted without them.

When teachers have the chance to work with community members, administrators, and school leaders, broad-scale change can happen. This year I worked with Los Angeles Unified School District board member and TFA alumnus Steve Zimmer (L.A. '92) on a task force to develop an “outdoor instructional space” at more than 1,000 schools in the nation's second-largest school district. As one of the only teachers on this task force, I helped to keep concrete student needs, not the ideals of adults, at the forefront of consideration. It was an amazing opportunity to collaborate with restoration ecologists, district-school-complex managers, school administrators, architects, parents, and many others to solve a problem we all recognized as a major obstacle to student health and achievement. Years in the district and paycheck size had no bearing on the weight of what we each brought to the dialogue.

Nowadays, teachers can advocate for change not just through unions, but alternative avenues like America Achieves or Teach Plus that convene



educators to influence urgent policy issues, like Common Core implementation, that impact students at local, state, and national levels. As part of a fellowship with Education Pioneers, I am working with the Los Angeles Unified School District on principal evaluations. Opportunities like this help to break down the us vs. them mentality that can be symptomatic of the relationship between administrators and teachers, or even the divides among teachers as we struggle with our own belief systems in the face of complex issues.

Let's seek and create, not divide and dismantle. “We” in education should always include students, families, administrators, community members, and, most definitely, teachers. Giving teachers a hand in policy creation and space for leadership in the reform movement is an important step to reconciliation and will ultimately empower one of the essential levers that determine student success: teachers.

Robert Jeffers teaches English and film at Susan Miller Dorsey High School in Los Angeles. He was the 2010 LAUSD Teacher of the Year.

Testing is a Double-Edged Sword

By Michelle Berg (Houston '93)

Principal, Excelencia School



I am the mother of two fantastic children who, at 5 and 7, are just beginning to make their way through the American educational system. My daughter, a second grader, is vivacious, loves animals, and is an amazing artist. One day, as I picked her up from school, I asked about her day and how she did on her math test. She sighed, turned to a teacher standing nearby and said, “Tests kind of mean a lot to my mom.”

Her words unleashed in me a torrent of conflicting feelings about testing and the role it plays in our society. As a mother, I can relate to parents around the country who have joined “opt-out” movements or other protests against the overuse of standardized testing in schools. But as the principal of a large, inner-city K-8 school in central Phoenix, I count myself among educators who know assessment is valuable to instruction, learning, and creating a more holistic understanding of student performance.

At the start of first grade, my daughter's principal told me that a baseline math assessment indicated my daughter could not add. I knew this wasn't true and eagerly explained that she could. My daughter was permitted to take another version of the test with

some minor accommodations. It worked. In fact, it showed she knew how to add, and add well.

My daughter had no problem keeping up with her classmates, but she struggled in test-taking situations. As educators, my husband and I knew we had to advocate for our daughter to ensure that she was not defined solely by her exam scores. Knowing firsthand the high stakes for schools when it comes to student performance, we counted ourselves lucky that her teachers and the school administration were more than willing to work with us to make sure we all had a comprehensive picture of her abilities.

A a principal, I know that for schools, testing is critically important. Unfortunately, most people see standardized testing as an end-of-year accountability piece to measure the effectiveness of a school. Personally, I see assessment as a starting point rather than a bottom line. At our school, the most productive and effective discussions about instruction begin with assessment data. Particularly in high-poverty schools like the one I run, having an objective measure of our students' learning as compared to their peers across all demographics helps us identify trends and gaps

so that we can make strategic choices for differentiation, remediation, and enrichment opportunities tailored to their needs. For us, assessment is one component of a robust instructional cycle, not a metric that stands on its own.

Yet given how high the stakes are for student performance on standardized assessments, it's not surprising that some schools end up focusing myopically on test scores. When this happens, our kids are the ones who lose out. Doing well on a standardized test should not be conflated with readiness for high school and beyond. The exams are narrow and too specific to give us a comprehensive understanding of a child's learning, or for that matter, what a child should ultimately know and do.

In my school, where parents and guardians may not have the background or understanding to advocate for their child's education, it's my duty to support our teachers in judiciously using assessment data in conjunction with a variety of authentic means of monitoring progress to create a well-rounded learner profile for each student.

When my daughter said that testing means a lot to me, she's right. I'm keenly aware of the importance society places on standardized testing as well as the instructional value that assessment data can provide. I also recognize that, at least for the foreseeable future, all children, including my own, will more than likely be measured by standardized tests throughout their academic careers, and possibly beyond. That means it's our job—whether we are parents, educators, or both—to recognize that tests are just one piece of a complex learning puzzle and that every child deserves to be defined by more than just a score.

Excelencia School in Phoenix was honored as an A+ School of Excellence in 2011.

IN HER WORDS

Why I Fought A School Closing



(Chicago ’02) and closed in 2013 due to under-enrollment, despite community protests to save the school. After Common Core implementation, only 11 percent of Henson Elementary’s students met or exceeded standards on the state test, but Hobson says the school community was working hard to turn things around. Henson’s 242 students—all black and almost entirely low-income—were diverted to “receiving schools.” Hatchett’s nephew now attends Herzl Elementary, a turnaround school half an hour from his home.

After Frazier closed down, my son went to Henson. He was there for a year, and he was doing better. He liked the principal, Mr. Hobson, and the teachers really worked with me to bring his grades back up. Before, he had trouble with reading, but at Henson he started reading out loud and comprehending better.

Henson had a resource center for parents; a food pantry, where I volunteered; and a [health] clinic for kids and their families. There were children with heart problems and a lot who had asthma, and they could treat them right there. It was a big thing for our children, so we didn’t have to worry about them in school.

Then they said Henson was closing. They told us was there was no air con-

EULER HATCHETT grew up in the North Lawndale section of Chicago, where a decline in population and the growth of charter schools have contributed to dwindling enrollment for many neighborhood schools. Hatchett cares for her nephew, a seventh grader, who is now enrolled in his fourth school in seven years, the result of two school closings and a transfer out of a charter school where she felt unwelcome. Her nephew’s last school, Henson Elementary, was led by Demetrius Hobson

ditioning; the children were down in their grades; it didn’t have enough children; there were no labs in the school. But I didn’t see why they couldn’t keep the school open. When we had meetings with the district, we arrived with the papers and parents showing them that the school was doing better and what they were saying about it was not true. But they didn’t listen to anything. Henson closed, and now my child’s at Herzl.

We had just gotten him settled again at Henson, and then we had to go through the same situation. That was three times he moved back and forth—almost every year he got transferred to a different school. He had to adjust to different children, different teachers. His grades dropped. He had trouble with the

children in the new school because they were messing with him.

He’s not a problem child, but I’ve seen his attitude change. I’ve seen him cry. He said, “Why do we have to change to another school? I just got used to my teachers. I just finally made some friends.”

Some days he gets this attitude where “I’m not going to do nothing.” He shuts down. We just got him to open back up at Henson, and now he’s shut down again. He’s just tired. So am I. Tired of going through this every time he has to move.

I was very angry about the closings—very angry. They say it’s the parents who don’t want the change, but it’s not that we don’t want the change. It’s about the children and what they have to go through. You’re messing with these children. You’re pushing us from neighborhood to neighborhood. I want my children stable in one school.

Herzl is farther. Now it’s 30 minutes to get there. It’s hard—a lot of us walk our children to school. Some parents can’t because they work and they don’t have nobody to take them to school. They’ve got to do Safe Passages [a city-sponsored program that puts trained adults along dangerous school routes for added security] because our kids live nowhere near these schools. We’re trying to find a place to put them into schools closer to our homes, but the district wants us out of here. They’re moving our children so far out because they want to “improve the city.”

They don’t value our neighborhood or our children. I don’t feel I have any choices. They do what they want to do. That’s how it seems to me. Every time we fought for our schools, they acted like they were concerned but then turned around and did the same things. It’s like they haven’t heard us. They’re not listening to the problems our kids and we are going through.

I want to say to them: Be concerned about the people in the neighborhood; be concerned about our children.

Teachers Unions as Champions of Social Justice

By Ben Spielberg (Bay Area ’10)
Executive board member, San Jose Teachers Association

During my second year in the corps, I became involved in the San Jose Teachers Association (SJTA). My two years on SJTA’s Executive Board have helped me understand why teachers unions are generally the most credible, important advocates driving change for low-income communities.

Many reformers perceive unions differently. They argue that SJTA’s forward-thinking approach to education reform is an anomaly and that unions who oppose reform ideas put “adult interests” ahead of student learning. These claims, however, are divisive and inaccurate; unionized teachers often spend the entirety of their professional lives putting student needs ahead of their own. To understand why unions sometimes appear intransigent, it’s important to understand what makes the San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) context unique.

SJUSD leadership clearly demonstrates their belief in the importance of organized labor, fair compensation, and collaborative policy development. Our district doesn’t point fingers or blame the opportunity gap on teachers; SJUSD management asks what they can do to help staff support students and invests in systems that empower staff to successfully execute their jobs.

Unfortunately, teachers and their unions are frequently attacked elsewhere—their basic job protections misconstrued, their character denigrated, and their voices ignored. As a result, unions who would otherwise pursue a

“Unions must make the effort to move beyond reflexively defensive postures and actively try to understand people with whom we disagree.”



help unions execute a social justice approach. At the same time, unions must make the effort to move beyond reflexively defensive postures and actively try to understand people with whom we disagree. Even when we see reform ideas implemented counterproductively, unions must keep an open mind and engage in solutions-oriented conversations about topics ranging from merit pay to standardized testing.

Teachers unions can also consider following SJTA’s example by proactively defining themselves as social justice organizations in two main ways. First, unions should clearly define a positive mission statement and orient their work towards their mission. SJTA’s mission is to “empower teachers to educate, inspire, and change lives through public education.” SJTA advocates for sustainable working conditions and fair labor practices, for example, not just because our hard-working educators deserve them, but also because students with happy, well-rested teachers and adequate classroom resources learn more.

We also co-designed an innovative new teacher evaluation system with SJUSD that uses several indicators of effectiveness and requires extensive training for multiple evaluators who conduct both formal and informal

observations. We believe more meaningful feedback about strengths and areas for growth will help teachers deliver excellent instruction to students. In addition, SJTA led efforts in 2012 to help fund public schools, pass San Jose’s minimum wage increase, and elect two excellent school board members. These successful campaigns translated directly into benefits for our students—an uninterrupted school year and financial support for students’ families. Our student-oriented mission guides all of SJTA’s work.

Second, unions should consider contract structures that reduce the time spent negotiating salary and benefits. SJTA and SJUSD’s “salary formula” directs a guaranteed percentage of the district’s revenue to teacher compensation. Though not a panacea, this system keeps wages fair and transparent and has helped enable SJTA and SJUSD to jointly pursue new approaches to evaluation, funding, permanent status, school redesign, teacher leadership pathways, and charter schools in ways that simultaneously help students and treat teachers and organized labor with respect.

My experience with SJTA demonstrates how much open-minded, proactive, and properly-supported social justice unions can accomplish. To address educational inequity on a larger scale, we therefore need more reformers and districts to stop bashing organized labor and start working with us. Together, we can develop the intelligent, ethical policies that benefit students most.

Ben Spielberg has worked as a math instructional coach for middle and high school teachers and has spent the last two years on the Executive Board of the San Jose Teachers Association. He blogs at 34justice.com.

The Great Corporate Reform Conspiracy

By Derrell Bradford

Executive director, NYCAN

During my career working in school reform I’ve been called a lot of things, but in recent years, two new buzzwords have risen to prominence in the anti-reform lexicon. Thanks to a disciplined media campaign by their opponents, reformers are now co-conspirators in a “corporate reform” and “privatization” revolution. It’s like one night I went to bed as a fighter for educational justice, and the next morning I woke up a tool of the Man turning our kids and schools into profit centers for the country’s oligarchs. Boy, did that happen quickly.

I keep looking for this “corporate” influence and “privatization” scheme, because I want to know how the money will actually get made. If there’s a school system in America that’s awash in cash—sitting on heaps of bullion à la Scrooge McDuck—I’d love to know where it is. More importantly, to believe that you’d have to ignore all the corporations and people who currently make money in our school systems: the vendors and lawyers, construction and insurance firms, and, well, the teachers. If you’re concerned about people making money in schools, I have news: You’re too late.

But I’m not going to the mat for profit or corporations here. Corporations have brought good into the world, but they’ve



also done some terrible things that lots of folks, perhaps rightly, hate them for. And “privatizer” has always had an insidious ring particularly in communities of color, where it means, broadly, “someone who has a job in a school or a post office today won’t have it tomorrow.” But the truth is that setting up straw men and name-calling like this only happen when you don’t have anything else to say and have lost the argument. Don’t think you can win on the merits? Just distract everyone and hope you can wait out the change-assault on the status quo.

In the end, I don’t care about the conspiracy theories. Some people consider me a frontline fighter among frontliners, because I have worked for over a decade on reform in tough places with tough political challenges: places like Camden and Trenton, New Jersey, that spend a lot on public education but produce very little for the folks who need it the most—the kids whose very existence hangs in the balance and for whom school is the only lever they have.

I grew up black and male in Baltimore City, so I see myself in each and every one of these kids. And I remember, like it was yesterday, the moment “corporate” reform (back then it was called a scholarship because we had no charters) touched my life and opened it up in

ways I never thought possible. “Reform” and some really amazing teachers made me live. They made me whole.

And this is perhaps why the accusations of “corporate” reform trouble me deeply, even as I ignore them. The life-saving change I pursue doesn’t exist in a cocktail-party bubble where very smart people cherry-pick how far they’re willing to go to save our kids. Parents whose children are locked in chronically underperforming schools don’t care who pays for “reform”—that’s a luxury for those with distance, success, and security. And most importantly, our students can’t wait one second more for the comfort and acceptance of those who don’t get that bringing great education to children and their families—regardless of who they are or where they live—is a matter of their survival and prosperity. Indeed, when you can swim, you can wait. When you’re drowning, you don’t care who throws the life preserver.

For those on the fence, I offer this: Education reform is not the corporate scheme; the current system is. America’s K-12 education system pushes the best teaching and schooling to the people who both need it the least and already have the most (a consequence of distributing school funding and great teaching through the housing market). It routinely segregates opportunity for kids based on their race and their income. And it distributes shrinking opportunity in the real world to a shrinking universe of children who are, more often than not, affluent and overwhelmingly white.

Take care to make sure the thing you’re fighting against isn’t the thing you already have.

NYCAN: The New York Campaign for Achievement Now is part of a national network of state-level advocacy groups fighting to enact research-based education reforms that benefit children.

What Policy Can't Do

By Mike Johnston (Delta ’97)

Colorado State Senator



I ran for the State Senate because of a student named Ulises. Five years later, the person I can’t stop thinking about is a teacher named Mark.

After teaching in the Mississippi Delta, I returned to my home state of Colorado to co-found the Mapleton Expeditionary School for the Arts. At MESA, we told students we would do everything in our power to get them to college and worked every day to keep that promise.

At lunch in the cafeteria one day, Ulises walked up to me with tears in his eyes and said, “Mr. Johnston, why did you make me do all this?”

He told me that he was undocumented and that the Colorado State Senate had just killed a bill that would have made students like Ulises eligible for in-state tuition. With that bill’s defeat, Ulises would pay eight times what his best friend would pay to go the same state college and would get no state or federal financial aid to help him. It meant school was functionally impossible.

Opening the door to college was a critical structural barrier that we needed a policy change to fix, but it is only a first step toward the long term goal of helping make sure Ulises, and all of our students, are getting the education, training, and support they need to be successful in school and life. Getting the policy framework right is a necessary but insufficient measure to actually change life outcomes for children.

I often think of transformational teachers as flowers that have grown up through concrete inside of a garage: They have succeeded despite living in an ecosystem that seems designed for their failure. The first step is changing that ecosystem to make it one that empowers living things to grow and thrive, so that it doesn’t take a feat of superhuman strength to succeed.

We endeavored to build a national model for what an educational greenhouse for teachers would look like, but the blueprint for that greenhouse is only a beginning. Next comes the work to make sure the architects build it with fidelity to the original design, then to see whether the design actually works in all the ways you hoped, and to be open to making adjustments when you hit unintended consequences.

That’s what brings me to Mark, an ambitious, optimistic veteran teacher in northern Denver. He has built a career as a teacher, and he supported the major education legislation that I sponsored—Senate Bill 191—because it put forth a holistic vision for the education profession: meaningful evaluation for educators, a focus on student achievement, replacing tenure with a system of protections that were earned and kept based on performance, and the elimination of last-in-first-out policies that were deeply at odds with educators’ sense of professionalism.

We have spent the last two years designing our standards for effective teaching, piloting our new teacher evaluation system, and training teachers and principals for our statewide rollout this fall.

Despite his support for the original concept, Mark has told me he’s worried about all the challenges that come with implementation: Will schools have the money they need to do the training and provide the support? Will they have staff with the expertise to give meaningful feedback? Will there be high-quality professional development available for those who need it? Will it be complicated or complemented by the simultaneous rollout of the Common Core standards and assessments?

Mark’s concerns are real, and in considering how to answer him, I’m faced with the limits of what policy can do. At the time of its passage, SB 191 represented a sea change in education policy. But at its heart, policy is only a blueprint, a statement of values and intent. Those goals can only be realized by a well-coordinated and deeply committed team of people who will build, maintain, and modify the real three-dimensional product that grows from that blueprint. The bill’s passage was a testament to its strongest champions, but its success will be contingent on its most honest critics.

As a teacher, I often felt like education policymakers and practitioners lived in two separate worlds and spoke different languages. One of the reasons I wanted to become a principal was to build a bridge between the worlds of policy and practice.

Now, five years into my role as a policymaker, it is abundantly clear that maintaining constant communication between policymakers and practitioners is not only the most important way to elevate the voices of educators—it is the only way to ensure the long-term success of our education system.

Sen. Mike Johnston (D-Denver) is serving his second term representing Northeast Denver in the Colorado State Senate. He chairs the Senate Finance Committee and serves on the Senate Education Committee.

Why Teacher PD Is So Bad (And How To Make It Great)

By Matthew Dennis (Colorado ’07)

Instructional support partner, Denver Public Schools

E ducation reform has almost become synonymous with hot-button topics like teacher tenure, evaluation, and merit pay. Yet just beyond these well-worn and heated debates lies the less-discussed but equally critical topic of how we develop our teachers at all stages of their careers. The good news is that we have the skeleton of what we need in the very evaluation systems and performance rubrics districts have clamored to create. The next step is making sure evaluation tools and ratings are transparent and used to develop teachers, not to punish them. District leaders and policy makers need to understand that we can’t simply replace bad teachers with stronger candidates who “get it.” Teachers need professional experiences tailored to their needs, as well as the trust and latitude to try new things and grow in their classrooms.

The current state of professional development is underwhelming at best; at worst, it’s an egregious mismanagement of priorities and people. Throughout my seven years as a teacher, I’ve gone through numerous district- and school-run professional development meetings and attended national education conferences. More often than not, they’re useless—random assortments of one-size-fits-all programming that don’t account for the skills I already have and those I need to develop. Even worse, as an instructional coach in a large urban district, I’ve often been trained and asked to



implement new teaching strategies or models that have, at best, a feeble correlation to better results for students.

Teachers don’t need a string of isolated one-day meetings and workshops that vaguely link to our end-of-year evaluations. We need a clear, continuous plan of long-term development aligned to priorities based on our individual needs as educators.

Instead of asking veteran educators to deliver pre-packaged PD which they themselves have hurriedly experienced, let’s give teachers more opportunities to design and experience a tightly focused scope and sequence of differentiated professional development tailored toward their growth. We can learn so much through collaborative case studies that give teachers a chance to take on different instructional challenges in a low-stakes environment. Instead of forcing educators through a revolving door of “sit-and-get” lectures or other isolated curricula, we need to focus on emerging teacher leaders as critical thinkers and treat them as professionals capable of learning multifaceted concepts.

Districts and administrators should seek out the voices of teacher leaders early in the design process. This fosters not only trust and ownership, but helps bring to the table those who understand the nuances and systemic gaps unique to each district and school. Yet if our voices are not sought, it’s up to us as teachers to agitate the system: Request to serve on professional devel-

opment committees at the district or state level, show your leaders the missing links between your development and evaluation, and cultivate a network of like-minded teachers who believe that those of us in the trenches should be driving reform.

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Evaluation Makes Better Teachers

By Maggie Thomas (D.C. Region ’03)

Assistant director, Master Educator Program, DCPS

My first year as a teacher, I was rated as “exceeds expectations”—quite a feat for a rookie. Until you understand that, in 2003, D.C.’s teacher evaluation system was a joke. Essentially it

was a checklist about classroom cosmetics: Did you post your objective? Are your bulletin boards updated each month? There was little about content, actual teaching strategies, or pedagogical knowledge. And most important, there was nothing about how my sixth-graders—some of whom came in reading on a first-grade level—responded. The system had nothing to do with whether my kids were learning.

Under this system, 95 percent of D.C.’s teachers were rated as “meets” or “exceeds expectations,” even though only 12 percent of eighth graders scored proficient on the NAEP’s math exam. It was a striking disparity—and one that said a lot about the efficacy of the evaluation system.

I understand why people get frustrated when you’re trying to dissect the art of teaching. But I also feel that protests against evaluation systems can be an excuse for not having high expectations for all teachers and all kids. I don’t care if you’re teaching in a high-poverty school or not—you should be using multiple ways to engage your students, leading an objective-driven classroom, and promoting higher-level thinking. There’s no arguing about that.

During the design of IMPACT, we heard from more than 1,000 teachers, so our multi-measured approach really taps into the most essential components of what effective teachers do. But the success of an evaluation system is not just about good design. It’s also about being willing to listen and change. At the end of the day, we care that our system feels rigorous, accurate and fair—and that means we need to hear often from teachers, union members, and principals about how it’s working for them.

Rather than digging in our heels against criticism, we welcome it. Thanks to teacher input from three dozen focus groups, we’ve made smart refinements to IMPACT. We now wait until after winter break to evaluate new teachers, and we’ve implemented a “rainy day” policy that drops an observation score that is significantly lower than a teacher’s average because we know that sometimes teachers just have off days.

We’ve also created a task force to ensure that our evaluators are calibrated on our rubric and giving consistent feedback that teachers can trust.

As our teachers have gotten acclimated and begun to trust in the system, the nature of comments has changed. Teachers have told me, “This is the most powerful feedback I’ve heard in 12 years.” Music instructors, art teachers, and special educators—those historically overlooked in both evaluation and development—now have the opportunity to receive content-specific feedback from master educators in their fields.

Herein lies the greatest potential of systems like IMPACT. At their best and truest, teacher evaluation systems are powerful tools for teacher growth. Before, it was impossible to know who needed what. That meant a seasoned, highly effective teacher got the same professional development as a new teacher. Now, with a clear view into teacher performance, we can provide highly tailored support, down to the level of specific skills.

And our teachers have risen to the challenge. Two years ago, we heard from our highest-performing teachers, “So I’m ‘effective’—now what?” In response, we launched the Leadership Initiative for Teachers, a career and compensation ladder designed to reward and motivate our best folks. As a result, we’ve been able to retain 92 percent of our highly effective teachers.

I’m proud to be part of a system that holds the bar high for teacher performance in every school and every classroom in the city, for the honor of our students. At the end of the day, having a strong teacher evaluation system serves our children by showing teachers how they can achieve greatness. We’re saying to teachers, “Here’s what excellent teaching looks like”—and making it as clear and visible as we can—so that you can take that ball and slam dunk it.

Maggie Thomas taught for six years before joining DCPS as a master educator in 2008. ★