

# TEACHER QUALITY



If you want to check on the country's pocketbook anxieties, you consult the consumer confidence index. If you want to monitor the marital yearnings of the privileged, you sift through the Sunday *New York Times* weddings. And if you need to take the temperature of the American dream, you call up Charles B. Reed.

Don't know Charlie? You should. He's the chancellor of California State University, the nation's largest four-year state university system with 450,000 students on 23 campuses. These sons and daughters, many the first in their families to go to college, earned their admissions tickets by graduating in the top third of their high school classes. Among them: the next wave of hungry entrepreneurs we need to energize the economy. As go these students, so goes America.

So it's crucial to know this: Six in every ten of these students have to take remedial courses in math or English. There's no ducking the crisis here. High school teachers may have awarded the students B averages, but they failed to teach them even the basics.

Fixing the problem, as seen in California and other states, is what the education "reform" movement has been about. Reformers pushed states to set ambitious learning standards, and the states agreed. The reformers convinced school districts to crank up the rigor of the curriculum, and they did. Reformers demanded stiff accountability, and many states responded with high school graduation exams.

Progress has been made. In states such as Massachusetts, which took the reform movement seriously, the gains have been significant. Still, a quick glance at any chart showing the declining education accomplishments of young Americans compared to our foreign competitors—students like those showing up at Cal State campuses—reveals that progress to date has fallen short.

Now, finally, we are attempting perhaps the most important reform: teacher quality. It's a shame we waited so long. Many research efforts pinpoint teacher quality as the crucial factor in student success. Children who have

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Knowing that would lead any parent to the conclusion that teachers should be hired, promoted, or fired based on their effectiveness in educating children. That simple formula, however—judging employees by the outcome of their efforts—although commonplace in the rest of society, remains elusive in the teaching profession. In most school districts, this is a reform barely thought possible. Why? Years of negotiations between teachers' unions and hapless school boards, many of them elected with union support, have left the teachers in charge of defining teacher effectiveness. Here's how that works: those who complete their

teacher training, participate in district professional training, attain advanced degrees, and stick around long enough, get pay raises. Problem is, the teaching profession doesn't draw the cream of the college crop, the quality of district professional training is iffy, many graduate degrees earned by teachers have nothing to do with effective teaching, and time on the job doesn't always create better teachers.

Therefore, it's possible to retire after a 25-year teaching career without once having been judged on whether your teaching stuck to the kids.

One schools chief determined to break that pattern is Michelle Rhee, chancellor of the Washington, D.C. schools, who gathered up enough foundation promises to make this offer to the district teachers: I'll give you beefy merit pay increases if you give up the job protections afforded by tenure. (Teachers who now average \$65,000 could earn as much as \$130,000 for getting their students' test scores up.) The teachers refused.

Rhee has not backed down, thereby drawing a line in the sand that may destroy her career. But she has no choice. Her district schools are surrounded by charter schools already educating a third of D.C. students. Those schools have full authority to hire and fire teachers. And, as *The Washington Post* reported recently, the academic track record of the charters is starting to look distinctly better than the schools Rhee oversees. If Rhee loses any more students to charters, her district will shrink to irrelevancy.

What may keep Rhee up at night is knowing just how powerful her competitors can be. About two years ago Mastery Charter Schools took over the violence-plagued Shoemaker Middle School in Philadelphia. The new charter took in the same students from the same neighborhood. The only change: a hand-picked staff bristling with positive attitudes and a finely honed teaching philosophy. In just two years, the school calmed down and math and reading scores surged.

Given the competition, it's reasonable to ask why the teachers' unions resist a reform that seems so inevitable. Ask that question of the United Auto Workers, who for years tucked away winnings gained from hapless corporate negotiators (think school boards) more keen on avoiding strikes than remaining competitive. Suddenly, an \$800 cost difference emerged between their cars and the cars of foreign competitors also building autos in the U.S. Today, those deft negotiations seem less winning. But who gives up something comfortable unless forced? Not auto workers and not teachers.

Perhaps teachers are pinning their hopes on the general satisfaction parents express with their suburban schools. That's dicey. Based on international comparisons, chances are those suburban schools aren't as effective as parents seem to think they are. Remember, many of those Cal State students now stuck in remedial classes came from suburban districts. Any day now, a win-through-suburbia strategy could start looking like a Chevy Tahoe rusting away on a used car lot.

Everyone knows that even great teachers can't always erase the ill effects of poverty on schoolchildren. I'm just saying this is a reform that can't be ignored. I should know. I taught high school for a year in upstate New York and I was truly a lousy teacher. As a newcomer I was handed every illiterate eleventh grader they could find and also assigned cafeteria duty. I couldn't even break up fights competently, let alone teach teenagers to read. But I glimpsed a handful of teachers elsewhere in that high school who flourished. There is a difference between good and bad teachers, a big difference, and children pay a steep price for unlucky assignments.

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So let's say President Barack Obama decides to push the envelope a bit on this issue, which seems to be on his mind. Why else would his transition team vet former Denver schools superintendent Michael Bennet as a possible education secretary? Before being appointed to the U.S. Senate, Bennet's performance pay plan was his claim to fame. And Obama ended up tapping Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan, who has taken some baby steps toward boosting teacher quality. At some Chicago schools, entire staffs receive cash bonuses when test scores go up. And the district is drawing on talented mentor teachers to advise other teachers.

Obama is blessed with good timing on this one. The American Federation of Teachers' new president, Randi Weingarten, is a savvy union leader fashioning herself as a reviver of the Al Shanker, streetwise style of kicking aside union orthodoxy for what makes sense. She'll stick to her guns, insisting that pay-for-performance be negotiated every step of the way, akin to the baby steps taken in Chicago. But for now the mechanics of achieving this change (education think tanks bristle with 20-point plans for making the transition happen) are less important than finally embracing a principle that should be uncontroversial and yet still draws fierce resistance: Effective teachers make a difference and the current system does next to nothing to reward effective teaching. When more school superintendents face what Rhee faces, those baby steps will turn into trots.

When considering the need for change, think of those students in California badly delayed on their pathway to the American Dream. They deserve better.

Actually, forget about the altruism. With our nation in dire need of economic innovation, we need better.

### **About the author**

Richard Whitmire graduated from the College of Wooster in Ohio and then taught high school English for one year in Canandaigua, N.Y., before taking a newspaper job in Geneva, N.Y. He worked on several New York papers before moving to Washington to take a job handling special projects with Gannett News Service. After working on the design and launch of *USA Today* he returned to Gannett News Service to cover the Pentagon. In 1986 he received a Knight Journalism Fellowship to study national security topics at Stanford University.

In 1991 Whitmire switched to reporting on education and in 2000 he joined the editorial board of *USA Today*, where he writes editorials about education issues. In 2004 he concluded a Journalism Fellowship in Child and Family Policy at the University of Maryland where he looked at why boys are falling behind in school.

Whitmire currently serves as president of the National Education Writers Association (EWA). During 2007 he launched an EWA campaign to pin down the Presidential candidates on education issues, writing op-eds for the major papers in early primary states. He recruited education reporters from around the country to track each candidate on an EWA blog.

In January, 2009, Whitmire left *USA Today* to pursue other writing projects. His blog, <http://www.whyboysfail.com>, pulls together his research and that of others on this subject.

Whitmire is married to ABC News senior producer Robin Gradison. They have two daughters.