

Ending the education wars

By Conor Williams

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Recently retired New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein made headlines this week when he told the Times of London that "it's easier to prosecute a capital-punishment case in the U.S. than terminate an incompetent teacher." The New York Post blared, "Joel: Easier to ax a killer than a teacher." The prize for most sensational probably goes to Liz Dwyer's headline, "Joel Klein Compares Teachers to Murderers."

There's plenty of scorched earth between Klein's words and these headlines, reflecting how unnecessarily polarized the education reform wars remain, even over the smallest changes in policy.

Here's the basic fault line dividing the education reform trenches: One side believes that the best way to improve the education system is to focus on improving instruction. The other believes that the best way to improve the education system is to focus on addressing the ways that poverty affects schools with high percentages of low-income students.

Intuitively, both positions make sense. A classroom with an incompetent teacher won't make as much progress as a classroom with a competent one. At the same time, though, it's probably true that low-income students sometimes enter classrooms with unfortunate social and economic -- not intellectual -- handicaps that students in the nation's wealthiest communities don't face.

Both sides also come armed with data. Diane Ravitch and others claim that there is a correlation between a school district's economic well-being and student success. While he found a similar correlation, Ulrich Boser showed that some of the nation's most efficient school districts have high percentages of low-income students. The Widget Effect, a comprehensive study of American teachers, found that our teacher-evaluation systems are laughably broken. Less than 1 percent of teachers in the study received "unsatisfactory" ratings from their districts, but 41 percent of teachers said they had a tenured colleague who should be dismissed.

Both sides can be egregiously unfair. Want to hear that you hate teachers? Claim that those that do their jobs poorly should be dismissed. You'll hear that the data are flawed (or that data are irrelevant), that teachers aren't the problem, that former District schools chancellor Michelle Rhee is not a nice person and that Teach for America is ruining education and this country.

Want to hear that you don't care about students? Claim that poverty might be a factor worth considering for educators working with low-income students. You'll hear that education isn't about serving adults, that all kids can learn, that you are a racist, that it's become impossible to fire a teacher and that teachers unions are ruining education and this country.

Here's some good news: Both sides are right. Teacher quality and poverty can both affect educational outcomes. Here's the bad news: Both sides seem bent on disproving their opponents instead of improving education. To borrow Woody Hayes's famous line, for every three yards of progress in education reform there's a voluminous cloud of dust. This isn't good enough. As Kevin Huffman put it in Monday's Post, parents don't "have the luxury of waiting a generation while intellectuals argue."

If both sides are being honest, it's unclear why they should be opponents. As someone who frequently writes on education reform, I'm always shocked by how rarely critics acknowledge that the American education system is in crisis. Instead, they question each other's sincerity, data or methods.

For example, when we read that it cost New York City \$2 million to dismiss three of its 55,000 tenured teachers for incompetence, we shouldn't think, "Scores of teachers are being unfairly victimized." These numbers are too absurd to be simply a matter of bad data or unfair administrators. Instead, we should wonder if Klein was onto something (even if he was over-dramatic).

We could spend our time debating which is easier (or more urgent) to fix -- poverty or school quality -- or we could accept that both are worthy goals. Our ends are the same, and our means aren't as different as they appear. No one wants to dismiss our nation's most effective teachers, and no one is rooting for an education system that consigns low-income students to be part of a permanent underclass. Let's all take a step in from the edges. Let's stop assuming each other's worst intentions. America's students are depending on us.

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