



Start Race to Top at the Bottom



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The marketplace of ideas for U.S. education reform is as crowded and unruly as a 40-student classroom. With marks that regularly put the nation on par with developing nations, the multiple choice answers suggested for remediation are endless.

To make real progress we'd do well to heed that most elementary test-taking strategy of tackling the most solvable problems first. Many of the best minds in education have figured out where to begin: Fire the bad teachers.

Our worst educators are costing the country billions. Ray Simon, Conway native and former deputy secretary for education in Bush 42's administration, made this point in his keynote speech at Economics Arkansas' Bessie B. Moore Awards luncheon earlier this month.

The program, hosted annually by the organization you can thank for making economics a core requirement for Arkansas high school graduation, heaps praise on teachers of all grades for creatively integrating principles of economics and personal finance into the classroom. After honoring a dozen exceptional teachers from around the state, Simon touched on the other end of the faculty spectrum: the worst classroom leaders.

"Identifying and replacing 6 percent of a school system's least effective teachers can turn around student performance and have a greater and more positive impact than any other expenditure designed to stimulate economic growth," Simon said.

A subpar teacher — one in the 16th percentile of effectiveness — will cheat each of his or her students out of more than \$40,000 in lifetime earnings, compared with an educator in the 84th percentile, Simon said. And closing the achievement gap with Finland, the nation that by many standards tops all others in student achievement, would increase the annual growth rate of the United States by 1 percent of GDP.

What's more, research suggests schools are running out of excuses to make improvements. Bad socioeconomic backgrounds, for example, are red herrings for poor performance. "No relationship exists between poverty and academic ability," Simon said. Sure, there's a correlation between poverty and academic achievement, but *ability* does not have the same bias. It's what happens in the classroom that makes the difference.

Even President Barack Obama, who in many ways has argued for leveling America's economic playing field, concedes that teachers are the biggest variable in the education equation. "The single most important factor in determining

[student] achievement is not the color of their skin or where they come from," he said. "It's not who their parents are or how much money they have; it's who their teacher is."

Obama's \$4 billion reform tool, Race to the Top, emphasizes among other things attracting and keeping great teachers. And his administration's No Child Left Behind waivers, of which Arkansas is a beneficiary along with 32 other states and Washington, D.C., encourages more honest, transparent systems for evaluating teachers and administrators. However, specific mechanisms for identifying and ridding schools of their least effective instructors remain the responsibility of individual states and districts.

And while this flexibility prevents Washington from exerting too much influence on issues likely best left to be addressed locally, the lack of uniform standards, or even concerted efforts toward bad-teacher triage, has created a national teaching force that doesn't weed out its worst actors.

A 2009 report by the New Teacher Project, which included analysis from four Arkansas districts and eight others in Colorado, Illinois and Ohio, found that 99 percent of teachers were given satisfactory evaluations even in the lowest performing schools.

Teachers unions around the country, historically implacable on the issue of removing bad instructors, are only just starting to give ground, though usually not without some benefits in return, like financial incentives for better performing teachers.

It's an unnecessary quid pro quo. In almost any workplace productive employees value their contributing peers and resent dead weight. Ask almost any teacher or administrator, and he will tell you the bad ones are easy to identify. Not as easy is establishing an effective, equitable way for getting rid of them.

Fixing the nation's education system requires acknowledgement from teachers, administrators, unions, politicians and parents that to bring out the best in our students we must first refuse to suffer the worst of our educators. ■

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