

THE DAILY VIEWS ~ OP/ED

Give them a little respect

School reform minus teachers is an equation for failure

by William C. Kashatus

Here we go again! With another school year on the horizon, Philadelphia's teachers are threatening yet another strike. It's becoming a ritual.

Over the years, the negotiations have involved benefits, pensions and merit pay. But the real issue is simply a matter of being respected . . . by the students, their parents and, most of all, by the superintendent of schools.

No one who's ever tried to work with youngsters will claim that teaching is an easy profession. It requires tremendous patience, competence in subject matter, and a genuine concern for young people. Caught in the widening chasm between state and local politics on one side, and the demands of school reform on the other, many teachers have thrown up their hands in despair. Others try to do the best they can within the system.

Whether deserving or not, teachers determine the success or failure of school reform — a fact that at least three of the city's former school chiefs failed to grasp when they lost touch with the human side of reform.

In his book "The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance and the Real-Life Problems of Innovation," Robert Evans, a clinical and organizational psychologist, explains that the best-intended reforms can be stalled by the resistance of educators who too often feel burdened and conflicted by the change process.

Significant change in the structure, curriculum and enrollment of schools often threaten faculty, particularly those who have been teaching for several decades and tend to be skeptical rather than eager about change. And for good reason.

Traditionally, the task of schools has been a conservative one: They prepare students for the unknown (the future), but they do so by teaching them the known (the past). We want schools to look to the past to teach values as well as history and math, but we also want them to look to the future in order to prepare students for an ever-changing society.

Philadelphia's school superintendents have always expected teachers to embrace their agendas. So while the public face of school reform emphasizes change, vision and strategic planning, there is actually very little of the kind of broad-based innovation glorified by the educators.

In the 1960s, "integration" was the buzz word for school change and Mark Shedd was appointed by Mayor Richardson Dilworth to carry it out. Under near-impossible circumstances, Shedd managed to stem the steep slide in standardized test scores, build new schools, raise teacher salaries and integrate the all-white system of administration by hiring and promoting several black administrators. But integration came too quickly for a district dominated by white teachers. Shedd never grasped that reality.

Instead of co-opting the teachers, he tried to pressure them into accepting integration by using the students as pawns for his agenda.

On Nov. 17, 1967, Shedd allowed a demonstration of black students demanding a more Afrocentric curriculum and a voice in school policies to continue outside the Board of Education building.

A clash with police, under the orders of then-Commissioner Frank Rizzo, resulted in several student injuries and eventually Shedd's undoing. When Rizzo became mayor in 1971, Shedd resigned. Shortly after, the state Human Relations Commission filed a lawsuit against the district for its failure to integrate.

In the 1980s, "tougher standards" became the rallying cry among educators across the nation and Constance Clayton was tapped by Mayor Bill Green to do the job in



Philadelphia.

Clayton, the first woman and first African-American to become superintendent, had risen from the ranks of the teachers and seemed a logical candidate to achieve the kind of consensus necessary to effect change.

While she restored faith in the district by ending teacher strikes and attracting corporate funding, she struggled to end social promotion — advancement through the system based solely on age rather than academic achievement — in the schools.

Though well-intended, her implementation of a standardized curriculum to narrow the gap between college preparatory and vocational tracking, had little impact as nearly 70 percent of the students failed to graduate or graduated with below-average skills.

Ultimately, Clayton's secretive approach to reform and selective sharing of test scores served to alienate her from the teachers, who could have secured her success.

Over the last decade, "accountability" has been the most recent call to arms among the nation's educators. In 1994, Mayor Ed Rendell selected David Hornbeck to institute that accountability in the School District.

To be sure, Hornbeck's "Children Achieving Initiative" offered the first comprehensive plan for reform in the history of the district, paving the way for the successful implementation of full-day kindergarten, tougher requirements for promotion and graduation, smaller class sizes, and the revival of summer school.

But Hornbeck proved to be more of a "preacher" than a "politician," especially among the rank-and-file. Though well-intentioned, his repeated evocation of "racially discriminatory" state formulas for school funding and his widespread staff reassignments at low-achieving Audenreid and Olney high schools, did not

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Ultimately, his tenure was doomed by a failure to apply the very same human side that informed his deep concern for the city's children to those who could ensure success — the teachers.

Urban school chiefs throughout the nation have struggled with the very same problem of how to win over teacher allegiance for school change. Some try to address the issue by encouraging veteran teachers to take early retirement, offering impressive financial packages. Younger, less experienced teachers are hired to take their place.

The assumption is that they will accept change without question. That is a dangerous assumption.

Not every veteran teacher is an opponent of reform, nor is every young teacher a willing advocate. We need a balance of experience and youthful idealism in our schools.

While there are no quick fixes to this problem, here are three suggestions for Philadelphia's next schools chief to consider if he, or she, hopes to experience more success than their predecessors:

1. Identify and nurture promising leaders among the faculty so they will have a vested interest in the changes that are made.

2. Clarify purpose, understanding that schools cannot be all things to all people. Any school that stays true to its core values as it responds to changing circumstances stands a far better chance of long-term success; and of retaining its most gifted teachers.

3. Temper expectations, realizing that no school transforms itself rapidly into something new. Choose your objectives wisely and practice what you preach on a consistent basis. Only then will you earn the trust and loyalty needed for substantive reform. ■

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