The Teachers’ Unions’ Last Stand

How Obama’s Race to the Top Could Revolutionize Public Education.

by Steven Brill


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Bigger than health care?

Brill claims that Obama’s media alluring, if cheesy-sounding, Race to the Top grant process may result in overshadowing health care reform in its impact and that it is already upending traditional Democratic Party politics. Its $4.3 billion budget is modest as it represents less than 1% of all education spending. It represents a frontal challenge to the teachers’ unions as they argue that a country that spends more per pupil than any other with performance in the bottom third of developed nations, still lacks trained, motivated, accountable talent at the front of the class.
How to win RTTT.

The winners will be the states that encourage innovation, which means, in part, allowing charter schools to flourish. The biggest focus (138 points out of 500) is on talent. This would suggest eliminating the most important protections enjoyed by unions for their members. They would be seniority-based compensation and permanent job security. To win, states had to present new laws, contracts, and data systems making teachers individually responsible for what their students achieve, and demonstrate, for example, that budget-forced layoffs will be based on the quality of the teacher. Another 47 points is based on data systems that track student performance and, therefore, teacher effectiveness.
Prior to the first round deadline in March of 2010, fifteen of the forty states that applied passed laws or revised regulations aimed at boosting their chances. Included were union strongholds of California, Ohio, and Michigan. This resulted in more reform than we have seen in decades at zero cost to the federal government.
The four forces

First is the rise of reformers who went to prestige colleges, joined Teach for America, got involved with charter schools, moved up the political ladder and were probably Democrats. Second are new Democratic politicians like Obama who are willing to challenge the teachers’ unions. Third are high powered foundations like the Gates Foundation who finance important research. Fourth is the charter school movement with 1.5 million students in 5,000 schools.
“Union Lackeys”

This was a typical title from newspaper editorials in referring to democratic legislators who are reluctant to take on union interests. Teachers’ unions are the base of the base of the Democratic party. They represent a quarter of union members, 10% of the delegates at the 2008 national convention, and have contributed 30% more than any corporation or other union. None the less, almost all states who submitted first round Race to the Top applications proposed reforms that a year ago would have been seen as pushing beyond what the teachers’ unions would allow. In New York, however, union clout prevented the state from addressing the core requirements of the Obama/Duncan agenda.
Either help or get out of the way.

The winners of the first round (Delaware and Tennessee) see that a culture change is coming and they would rather lead. The union president in Delaware was on the panel that presented their application. After doing what he could to help teachers get what they wanted over the years, Governor Phil Bredesen of Tennessee pushed to pass laws allowing more charter schools and making student test scores 50% of annual teacher evaluations.
In Harlem, 20% of all children are enrolled in charters. In April of 2010, 14,000 other children submitted applications for 2,700 open seats. In spite of this, Bill Perkins, who represents Harlem in the State Senate, is the legislature’s leading opponent of charters. He blames lack of resources in a city that spends $19,358/student rather than unions. Like most charters, those in Harlem pay teachers a bit more but expect them to work longer days and start in August. This includes Saturday sessions for some. They must attend meetings after school, which are voluntary for public school teachers who get $42/hr. A charter that shares a building with a public has 5% of 3rd graders reading below grade level compared to 49% for the public.
Joel Klein, New York City’s School Chancellor, feels that charters can demonstrate how public schools can be improved, while creating healthy competition for a system that used to be a monopoly. Sheldon Silver, the leader of the Democrat controlled State Assembly, sided with the union over winning a possible $700 million. Some think that the union helped draft poison-pill provisions in the state’s memorandum of understanding that was part of the Race to the Top application. It included “Nothing in the M. O. U. shall be construed to override any applicable state or local collective-bargaining requirements.” As such agreements prohibit the reforms in the application, Klein says “it’s like telling a woman you’ll marry her in the morning.”
In spite of the language in the M. O. U. the UFT representative in New York City refused to sign it and submitted one that was even more watered down. When David Steiner, Commissioner of Education, and four others made their presentation to the Race’s vettors, Brill thought “it looked a bit like a hostage tape.” They thought they had a great proposal in terms of what they could control like curricula, standards, and data systems, but they couldn’t control the contracts and the laws.
Union leaders in the city are trying to give a bit. In April, they agreed to streamline the discipline process in order to close New York’s so-called rubber rooms where teachers charged of with the most extreme misconduct are sent to do nothing while they await tenure-protected arbitration hearings. These hearings average three years, during which the teachers get full pay and pension entitlements. Only a handful are ever dismissed. The new process will now take about a year but there will be no broader process in place for evaluating, promoting, or removing teachers based on performance.
Catch 22 - Union Style

Randy Weingarten, AFT President, embraces teacher accountability in theory, but with the caveat that the system has to be fair, after which she adds that there’s no way to guarantee that linking student progress to testing will be fair. She also states that subjective evaluations by principals can’t be fair either. (Doug: I don’t expect the unions in places like New York to give on critical issues. It’s just not in their DNA.)

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We all need another hero.

Michelle Rhee is the superintendent of Washington, D. C. schools. When she arrived, all teachers had satisfactory ratings, but only 8% of 8th graders were on grade level for math. She has negotiated with Weingarten and won the ability to fire teachers who are ineffective for one year or minimally effective for two. New York’s Klein calls this a home run. This gives D. C. a better shot in round two of the Race to the Top.
The political math has changed.

Mike Johnston, a Colorado state senator, sees the political math changing as he can count on every Republican and some Democrats to pass a “Race friendly” bill that ties student test scores back to teachers but also names the institutions that trained them so that they would also be held accountable. In late May of 2010, his bill passed by a wide margin with votes from both parties. Weingarten endorsed the bill after a few minor amendments.
Education will never be the same.

That Obama did this makes it a total game changer. If he really sticks to this, education will never be the same. Duncan calls it “the chance of a lifetime.” He also says that “what we want are plans that touch the most children. Ideally we want the adults working together, but at the end of the day, this is about doing reform.” (Doug: Is this change you can believe in? Stay tuned.)