ADVISOR PERSPECTIVES

Waiting for Superman: The Fate of Teachers' Unions

By Charlie Curnow
November 9, 2010

In "*Waiting for Superman*,*"* the new documentary film about the shortcomings of American public education, director Davis Guggenheim argues that, in order to compete with rival school systems in Asia and Europe, the U.S. must rein in its teachers unions and embrace the free market principles of private schools and privately managed charter schools.

Teachers unions have been under fire from conservative pundits and policymakers for years. Amplifying those criticisms, sovereign debt crises in countries such as Greece and Britain have led policymakers in those countries to slash public employee benefits as part of wider austerity plans. In the U.S., much of the $3 trillion in unfunded pension liabilities state governments face today results from promises to public school teachers. But large and influential teachers unions will make it very difficult both legally and politically for state lawmakers to follow the Europeans' lead in cutting back.

If Guggenheim and others are correct, however, and unionized teachers in traditional public schools not only cost more than their non-union counterparts in charter schools but also produce worse educational outcomes, anti-union forces would have powerful ammunition. But is it true?

Charter schools to the rescue?

Teachers' unions, Guggenheim argues, shield the worst instructors from accountability and prevent the best educators from receiving their just rewards. Large and well-funded teachers' unions use their power to shield their members from firing by providing financial and political support to favored public officials, who are almost exclusively Democrats. Until they were shut down by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg in June, perhaps the most extreme examples of this alleged dysfunction were the city's "rubber rooms," where teachers accused of incompetence or wrongdoings sat idle for months while waiting for hearings with administrators, all while retaining their full pay and benefits.

Meanwhile, the intended heroes of Guggenheim's film are the leaders of the country's charter schools, which almost exclusively employ non-union labor. Two of these leaders are Mark Feinberg and David Levin. In 1994, after each completing a two-year stint in Teach for America, a nonprofit community service group that recruits recent college graduates to teach in poverty-stricken school districts across the United States, Feinberg and Levin founded the Knowledge is Power Program, or KIPP, which has since expanded into the country's largest chain of charter schools.

A number of independent studies, including one released this year by Mathematica Policy Research, a public policy think tank, have found that KIPP schools — which tend to located in impoverished urban neighborhoods with largely black and Hispanic populations and feature extended school days and six-day weeks — have boosted student reading and math scores significantly compared to traditional public schools. Feinberg, Levin and others like them in the charter school movement, the film would have us believe, have found the formula for success in urban education, if we would only muster the political will to put it into wider practice.

Guggenheim's evidence, however, is highly anecdotal. Nationwide and international statistics tell a very different story. For starters, if KIPP charter schools do outperform their traditional public school rivals, they are truly exceptional. A study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes released this year found that 37 percent of charter schools perform significantly worse than matched public schools on student math and reading achievement tests, even after adjusting for factors such as student demographics, household income and special education status. Only 17 percent do significantly better, while 46 percent do about the same. That Guggenheim mentions the 17 percent of outperforming charter schools in the film but fails to mention the other 83 percent is deplorable.

Don't blame the unions

So if charter schools won't save the American education system, what will? Instead of privatizing the education system, perhaps we could start by reforming the public schools we already have. A 2007 study by the business consultancy group McKinsey found that two factors within the control of school administrators stand above all others when it comes to ensuring student success worldwide: recruiting the most talented young graduates to become teachers and providing instructors with continual training and support throughout their careers.

In Finland, the country that ranked first in the world in math, reading and science on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's most recent Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams, and which Guggenheim holds up as a model for a successful education system, teacher training programs recruit from the top 10 percent of high school graduates each year. Moreover, places for new teaching trainees are strictly limited by the government to match school demand, making competition for seats fierce. In the U.S., by contrast, only 23 percent of new teachers come from the top third of their class, including just 14 percent of new teachers in high-poverty schools, according to another McKinsey report released in September. The number of places in U.S. undergraduate education programs is left up entirely to the universities. In stark contrast to the Finns, who filter their recruits up front, U.S. schools tend to wait until the hiring stage to filter out new teaching recruits, leading to an uneven and frequently flooded labor market.

Teacher qualification standards are also often higher in top-performing countries than in the U.S. All new Finnish teachers, for example, must hold a master's degree in education or in the subject they wish to teach, and must also pass two rounds of exams for literacy, numeracy, problem solving and communications skills before entering training. After all of that, there's still a third round of tests conducted after they graduate college by the individual schools at which they apply to work. Compare that to the U.S. system, where just 52 percent of traditional public school teachers and 36 percent of charter school instructors hold a master's degree or higher, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Many charter schools don't even require their instructors to pass state licensing exams, a minimum qualification for starting teachers at traditional public schools.

This marked difference between the teaching qualification standards of U.S. charter schools and traditional public schools may help explain much of the performance gap between them. Furthermore, this gap illustrates one reason why a unionized teaching profession actually makes sense. While trade unions in any industry can indeed flatten wages for workers with disparate performance levels, they also help enforce uniform qualification and training standards. Ninety-five percent of Finland's teachers belong to labor unions, and those teachers tend to enjoy many of the same rights and privileges (including "tenure") that unionized teachers in the U.S. do. Furthermore, the suggestion that union contracts shield teachers from any negative consequences is absurd — "rubber rooms" and other aberrations aside, even long-time teachers in the U.S. are subject to regular observation and performance reviews by administrators, and can, in fact, be fired after due process hearings.

But what about merit pay? Surely the top school systems must place heavy emphasis on material incentives to reward their best instructors and punish the laggards? Not necessarily, says the McKinsey report. Separate independent studies of schools in Denver, Texas and North Carolina all found no substantial gains in student performance after the institution of merit pay systems.

The more important incentives for teachers, according to McKinsey, are non-financial: high expectations, a shared sense of purpose, and a collective belief in their ability to make a difference in the educations of the students they serve. Also essential are regular check-ups to bring specific methodological weaknesses to light and the constant sharing of specific best practices, spread through their demonstration in actual classrooms.

Finland's system once again sets a good example in this regard. Instead of breeding a culture of cutthroat competition, Finland encourages its teachers to work together, and it gives instructors one free afternoon per week to plan lessons jointly, observe each other's classes, and help one another improve. Stateside, in Boston's public schools, administrators plan daily schedules so that all instructors who teach the same subjects have free periods at the same time. Teachers use these periods to make joint lesson plans and to analyze teaching practices using student assessment data.

Steep odds

The climax of Guggenheim's film depicts five different families across the United States as they wait for their numbers to be drawn at entrance lotteries for five different charter schools in their communities. The real lottery for most of these children, however, took place long before these scenes were filmed — at birth.

Studies by economists Eric Hanushek, John Kain and Steven Rivkin have found that, while teacher quality is indeed the most important factor in student achievement that schools can control, it still accounts for only 7.5 percent of total variation in test scores. According to University of Washington economist Dan Goldhaber, all school-level factors combined, including variables accounted for by teachers and classroom peers, account for just 21 percent of score differences. By far the largest determinants of student success, at 60 percent of all score variations, are individual and family background characteristics such as household income. Academic performance is thus not merely or even primarily a school administration issue, this research suggests. It is a socioeconomic issue.

And now the most important statistic of all: 20 percent of American children live below the poverty line, compared to less than 5 percent in Finland. If you are a member of that 20 percent, you are not only more likely to attend an underfunded and understaffed school, you will also be more likely to suffer from abuse, neglect or malnutrition; to be homeless; or to have parents who are dead, divorced or imprisoned. Chances are that you have not only lost the lottery in education, but also perhaps in life.

All of this suggests that Guggenheim's faith in charter schools as the "supermen" that will save the education system is misplaced. Simply adding more slots in charter school lotteries will not close America's academic achievement gap. As long as so many children face such steep odds before they ever walk into the doors of a school, we all lose.

www.advisorperspectives.com

For a free subscription to the Advisor Perspectives newsletter, visit:
http://www.advisorperspectives.com/subscribers/subscribe.php

© Copyright 2010, Advisor Perspectives, Inc. All rights reserved.