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The New Haven Experiment

NEW HAVEN

I lost patience with teachers' unions when union officials in New York City defended a teacher who had passed out in class, reeking of alcohol, with even the principal unable to rouse her.

Not to mention when union officials in Los Angeles helped a teacher keep his job after he allegedly mocked a student who had tried to commit suicide, suggesting that the boy slash his wrists more deeply the next time.

In many cities, teachers' unions ensured no one was removed for mere incompetence. If a teacher stole or abused a student, yes, but school boards didn't even try to remove teachers who couldn't teach.

"Before, you had to go smack the mayor in order to get fired," Reggie Mayo, the schools superintendent here in New Haven, told me.

That's what makes an experiment under way here so jaw-dropping. New Haven has arguably become ground zero for school reform in America because it is transforming the system with the full cooperation of the union.

One of America's greatest challenges in the coming years will be to turn around troubled schools, especially in inner cities. It's the civil rights issue of our age, and teachers' unions have mostly been an exasperating obstacle.

Yet reformers like myself face a conundrum. Teachers' unions are here to stay, and the only way to achieve systematic improvement is with their buy-in. Moreover, the United States critically needs to attract talented young people into teaching. And that's less likely when we're whacking teachers' unions in ways that leave many teachers feeling insulted and demoralized.

The breakthrough experiment in New Haven offers a glimpse of an education future that is less rancorous. It's a tribute to the savvy of Randi Weingar-

Reforming the schools with the help of teachers.

ten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers and as shrewd a union leader as any I've seen. She realized that the unions were alienating their allies, and she is trying to change the narrative.

New Haven may be home to Yale University, but this is a gritty, low-income school district in which four out of five kids qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. Eighty-four percent of students are black or Hispanic, and graduation rates have been low.

A couple of years ago, the school district reached a revolutionary contract with teachers. Pay and benefits would rise, but teachers would embrace reform — including sacrificing job security. With a stronger evaluation system, tenure no longer mattered and weak teachers could be pushed out.

Roughly half of a teacher's evaluation would depend on the performance of his or her students — including on standardized tests and other measures of learning.

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Teachers were protected by a transparent process, and by accountability for principals. But if outside evaluators agreed with administrators that a teacher was failing, the teacher would be out at the end of the school year.

Last year, the school district pushed out 34 teachers, about 2 percent of the total in the district. The union not only didn't object, but acknowledged that many of them didn't really belong in the classroom.

"We all use the same litmus test: Would we want our kid in that room?" says David Cicarella, president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, the local union. "We all recognize that we need to do something. Tenured teachers who are ineffective — that is an issue. We want to do something about it. But it's not fair either to blame all teachers."

Cicarella says that teachers accept that the world has changed. Accountability and feedback are welcome if they are fair, he says, adding: "It's not O.K. any more to spray and pray."

So far this year, administrators have warned about 50 more teachers that their jobs are in jeopardy because of weak teaching. That's out of 1,800 teachers in the district.

Mayor John DeStefano Jr. of New Haven says that the breakthrough isn't so much that poor teachers are being eased out, but that feedback is making everyone perform better — principals included. "Most everybody picked up their game in the district," he said.

It'll take years to verify that students themselves are benefiting, but it's striking that teachers and administrators alike seem happy with the new system. They even say nice things about each other. In many tough school districts, teachers are demoralized and wilted; that feels less true in New Haven.

The New Haven model still doesn't go as far as I would like, but it does represent enormous progress. And it's a glimpse of a world in which "school reform" is an agenda and not just a term that sets off a brawl.

If the American Federation of Teachers continues down this path, I'll revisit my criticisms of teachers' unions. Maybe even give them a hug for daring to become part of the solution. □

