



# Where We Stand

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## Yellow Journalism

**Unions do not hire, evaluate, promote, or grant tenure to teachers.**

Last week, *U.S. News & World Report* had a cover story called “Why Teachers Don’t Teach” (February 26, 1996). It blamed our overall educational problems - and especially the fact that there are some incompetent teachers - on problems with teacher education, licensing, hiring, evaluation, tenure, and dismissal policies. And it pinned the blame for all these problems on teacher unions. These are important issues. Unfortunately the article was as accurate and constructive about them as the Willie Horton ad, which ran during the 1988 presidential campaign, was about our crime problems.

Yes, there are some bad teachers (and doctors, lawyers, barbers, parents, reporters, etc.). Teacher unions would strongly prefer there to be none. But we don’t run colleges, teacher education programs or teacher licensing systems, though we’ve aggressively pursued much higher standards in all of them. And we’re not the ones who routinely ignore even the modest teacher licensing standards by issuing “emergency” credentials to people who don’t pass muster.

Nor do unions hire, evaluate, promote, or grant tenure to teachers. School boards and principals do that. *U.S. News* doesn’t like the results but nevertheless argues that school boards and principals should be given an absolute, incontestable right to fire a teacher they evaluated favorably for years and then tenured. Why would their judgment be any better *after* they granted tenure than it was before, when they had unchecked power to fire or retain the teacher?

Tenure is a right to due process; it’s not a job guarantee. Like democracy, it is hardly perfect, but it’s better than the alternatives. It is certainly better than resting our faith on individual and governmental infallibility, which is what *U.S. News & World Report* would put in its place. A more practical and achievable solution for mere mortals would be to make the system for determining and removing incompetent teachers faster, more professional, and less legalistic.

Actually, the utopia that *U.S. News* longs for where teachers have neither collective bargaining rights nor due process and school boards and principals can pretty much do what they like, already exists. It’s called the American South. So here’s a simple test. If teacher unions are responsible for the problems of our educational system, states like Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi should post much higher student achievement than the states where teachers have collective bargaining rights and due process upon tenure. And they should be even farther ahead than, say, Japan, where teachers get tenure the day they are hired and unions are far more powerful than ours. Moreover, England, which gutted teacher unions and teacher rights under Margaret Thatcher, should have much higher student achievement than did pre-Thatcher. Wrong on all counts.

*U.S. News* seems to think that collective bargaining agreements - the article calls them “teacher union contracts” - are written exclusively by teacher unions. Wrong again. They are the products of negotiations

with school board representatives, and the results must be ratified by the school board, as well as by rank-and-file teachers. I've negotiated a lot of contracts, and there's not one I wholly liked. On some points the union wins, on others the school board wins, but usually there is a compromise. Once in a while, something gets through that shouldn't have, but both sides have to share the responsibility for that.

*U.S. News* also alleges that even teachers dislike the contracts negotiated by their union. No question that some teachers do. But the article's allegation that unions don't represent their members is preposterous. The "demands" the union puts on the negotiating table represent the views of the majority of teachers. Union officials and their members talk together constantly, educating one another about issues and about what's sound and doable - and union leaders stand for election every two years. The article also accuses teachers of pursuing their self-interest. Guilty as charged; that is the American way. But saying that teachers *always* put themselves ahead of the needs of students is as incredible as believing that the school boards we negotiate with never put themselves or the interests of management ahead of the interests of students or the public.

The article makes a big point about teachers' teaching outside of their specialties. There is no question that this happens, but when math or science courses are taught by English or history teachers, it's rarely, if at all, because of unions or seniority rules; it's because of chronic shortages of teachers in these fields. And if it has ever happened that a union has demanded that a more senior teacher licensed in, say, math be allowed to bump a more junior teacher licensed in another subject or a high school teacher to bump an elementary teacher on the basis of seniority, somebody ought to come to the bargaining table and demand that the rules permitting these things be changed. We don't get rid of democracy because of occasional bad laws; we change the laws.

The cover girl for "Why Teachers Don't Teach" is a Harvard graduate who could not get a job substitute teaching in New York City, and the reporters allege that she illustrates how union rules and bureaucracy discourage the best young people from becoming teachers. Her story may be an example of a bureaucratic mess, but it is not a union mess. Assuming the facts are as reported, the young woman was unable to get her job because of licensing office procedures (over which the union has no authority). And if the teacher union - in this case AFT - acts as a roadblock to getting talented people into teaching, then how come this young woman got a job in another school district where AFT also represents the teachers?

It's a shame that *U.S. News & World Report* chose to take a cheap shot at teachers and their freely elected representatives when they could have dealt constructively with the serious issue of teacher quality. It will make the task of reform all the more difficult. How many talented young people did they encourage to come into or remain in teaching with their headline "Why Teachers Don't Teach" and by advocating that teachers should have no rights? Undoubtedly, a lot fewer than the ones they allege have fled teaching because of teacher unions, collective bargaining, and due process.

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**Mr. Shanker's comments will appear in this section every Sunday, under the auspices of the New York State United Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers. Reader correspondence is invited. Address letters to Mr. Shanker at AFT, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington DC, 2000.**