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Set up by policy to fail

Why do good teachers stay in stable schools? The system is rigged

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WACO, Texas --

The lady is one of the best teachers around.

She engenders respect from students, and love. She knows her subject matter. She knows children.

She also knows a losing proposition when it is placed before her.

Such was the case when she was asked to come work at a "low-performing" school, too-cavalierly called a "failing school" by people who have little context from which to speak.

She said no. She's no fool.

Ah, you mean a bad school scared her away? Not even close. I can't speak for her, but I'll bet she agrees: That school isn't as bad as advertised and certainly not "failing." The school does good things, even heroic things, in the face of great challenges. One of its challenges is policymakers overcompensating to the point of making teachers' jobs that much more difficult.

Not a scapegoat

She knows how many principals have come and gone, and not out of incompetence; how many "teams" have shuffled in and out with "new approaches;" how they all brought an "increased focus" on tested skills. Uh huh. Another reason the good teacher says no to the "failing" school is that she doesn't want to commit a year of her life and then be someone's scapegoat when the numbers don't inch up fast enough. Even if the numbers go up, she's not interested in altering what she does because some outside consultant or newly marketed curriculum guarantees a better way.

She knows which way works.

She also knows how "school accountability" works. Policymakers may say they place a premium on excellence. That's a lie. They place a premium on competence, but at the very top, nationwide and at the state level, failure is what the system is all about. Failure is what they crave.

Part of the scheme

Whether it's the Texas accountability system or the federal No Child Left Behind, failure is crucial so that advocates of school vouchers and privatization can bring their schemes into being.

Any number of schools in the country have met all state requirements only to be cited as unsatisfactory under the federal law. After all, the law has 21 categories in which each school must show average yearly progress.

Each year state and federal requirements get ratcheted up, so that more "failure" is guaranteed.

What's insane is that when we talk about yearly progress we aren't talking about the progress of individual students. We're rating each new group of students against the last.

We're also rating students based on the most arbitrary of considerations, a set grade level for a set age. But, of course, students learn differently.

Consider those whose skills are above grade level. Because of "accountability," in the "failing" school they may have to wear the anvil of communal emphasis on whatever subject the state has cited as a sore subject.

As for those below grade level, they might actually be making considerable progress based on their abilities, disabilities and formative experiences, but that doesn't matter.

Arbitrary standards

As one teacher in an inner-city Pennsylvania school told Time magazine, "This child has had tremendous growth, but he'll still bomb the PSSA (Pennsylvania System of School Assessment) test because he isn't at grade level."

Yep, a failure. Say it with me. Failure!

For these reasons, an unintended result of NCLB has been that high-quality teachers leave or stay away from schools deemed low-performing.

And why? Because even when they win, they can't win. Even if they succeed, by someone's arbitrary standards it's more likely than not that they have "failed."

So the great teacher stays at a school that's stable and highly regarded and doesn't have the same social challenges and uncertainties that the "failing" one does.

And we're surprised.

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