

Quieting the Teacher Wars

What History Reveals about an Embattled Profession



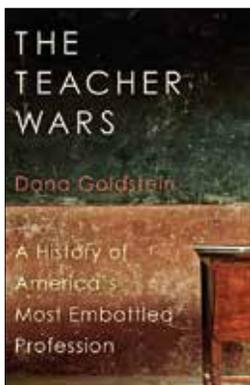
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BY DANA GOLDSTEIN

I began writing my book *The Teacher Wars* in early 2011 with a simple observation: Public school teaching had become the most controversial profession in America. Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana, and even the Democratic governor of deep-blue Massachusetts, sought to diminish or eliminate teachers' rights to collectively bargain. Teacher tenure was the subject of heated debate in statehouses from Denver to Tallahassee, and President Obama swore in his State of the Union address to "stop making excuses" for bad teachers.¹

One rising-star Republican, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, even became a conservative folk hero after appearing in a series of YouTube videos in which he excoriated individual public school teachers—all of them middle-aged women—who rose at public events to challenge him on his \$1 billion in education budget cuts, even as he cut \$1.6 billion in corporate taxes.

*Dana Goldstein is a staff writer at the Marshall Project and a contributor to Slate, The Atlantic, and other magazines. She writes about education, social science, inequality, criminal justice, women's issues, cities, and public health. This article is excerpted with permission from her book *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*. Copyright © 2014 by Dana Goldstein. Published by arrangement with Doubleday, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC.*



Clockwise from left: A teacher and her integrated kindergarten class in Washington, D.C., in 1954; long before his presidency, Lyndon B. Johnson with his first pupils in Cotulla, Texas, in 1928; Susan B. Anthony and W. E. B. Du Bois, both of whom also taught.

Few other professions operate under this level of political scrutiny. In 2010, *Newsweek* published a cover story called "The Key to Saving American Education." The image was of a blackboard, with a single phrase chalked over and over again in a child's loopy handwriting: *We must fire bad teachers. We must fire bad teachers. We must fire bad teachers.* Wide-release movies like *Waiting for "Superman"* and *Won't Back Down*, funded by philanthropists who made their fortunes in the private sector, portray teacher tenure and its defender, teachers unions, as practically the sole causes of underperforming schools.

Everywhere I traveled as an education reporter, from the 2008 Democratic National Convention to the 2010 meeting of former president Bill Clinton's Clinton Global Initiative, powerful people seemed to feel indignant about the incompetence and job security of public school teachers, despite polls showing that the American public considers teachers highly respected professionals, nearly on par with medical doctors.²

To an extent, anxiety about bad teaching is understandable. Teachers do work that is both personal and political. They care for and educate our children, for whom we feel a fierce and loyal love. And they prepare our nation's citizens and workers, whose wisdom and level of skill will shape our collective future. Given that teachers shoulder such an awesome responsibility, it makes sense that American politics is acutely attuned to their shortcomings.

So I want to begin by acknowledging: It is true that the majority of American teachers have academically mediocre backgrounds. Most have below-average SAT scores and graduate from nonselective colleges and universities.³ It is also true that one large review of practices within typical American elementary school classrooms found many children—and the majority of poor children—“sitting around, watching the teacher deal with behavioral problems, and engaging in boring and rote instructional activities such as completing work sheets and spelling tests.”⁴

In the Obama era, the predominant policy response has been a narrow one: to weaken teachers’ tenure protections and then use “measures of student learning”—a euphemism for children’s scores on an ever-expanding battery of hastily designed tests—to identify and fire bad teachers. One Colorado teacher told me (hyperbolically) that the disproportionate focus on punishing awful teachers made her feel “I’ve chosen a profession that, in the public eye, is worse than prostitution.”

A spate of online videos and blog posts, in which angry teachers publicly quit their jobs, has gone viral. “I can no longer cooperate with a testing regime that I believe is suffocating creativity and innovation in the classroom,” wrote Ron Maggiano, a Virginia high school social studies teacher and winner of two national teaching awards. In Illinois, Ellie Rubenstein tendered her resignation via YouTube, explaining, “Everything I loved about teaching is extinct. Curriculum is mandated. Minutes spent teaching subjects are audited. Schedules are dictated by administrators. The classroom teacher is no longer trusted or in control of what, when, or how she teaches.”⁵

Olivia Blanchard chose to leave her Teach for America placement in Atlanta, where hundreds of thousands of dollars in merit pay bonuses had been paid to administrators and teachers who cheated by erasing and correcting students’ answers on standardized tests before submitting them to be graded. After a round of indictments, those teachers who remained in the district were left demoralized and paranoid. When Blanchard clicked send on her resignation e-mail, she was “flooded with relief,” she recounted in *The Atlantic*.⁶

Blanchard, Maggiano, and Rubenstein represent a larger trend. Though polls show teachers feel more passionate and mission-driven about their careers than other American professionals, a MetLife survey of teachers found that between 2008 and 2012, the percent who reported being “very satisfied” with their current job plummeted from 62 to 39 percent, the lowest level in a quarter century.

History Repeating Itself

I had assumed this war over teaching was new, sparked by the anxieties of the Great Recession. After all, one-fifth of all American children were growing up poor—twice the child poverty rate of

England or South Korea. Young adults were suffering from a 17.1 percent unemployment rate, compared with less than 8 percent in Germany and Switzerland. More than half of recent college graduates were jobless or underemployed for their level of education.⁷ A threadbare social safety net, run-amok bankers, lackadaisical regulators, the globalization of manufacturing, and a culture of consumerism, credit card debt, and short-term thinking might have gotten us into this economic mess. But we’d be damned if better teachers couldn’t help to get us out. “Great teachers are performing miracles every single day,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said in 2009. “An effective teacher? They walk on water.”⁸ The rhetoric could provoke whiplash. Even as we were



A classroom in New York City's Lower East Side, circa 1886

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For 200 years, the American public has asked teachers to close troubling social gaps.

obsessed with the very worst teachers, we were worshipping an ideal, superhuman few.

This confusing dichotomy led me to wonder: Why are American teachers both hated and idealized, when teachers in other nations are much more universally admired? In South Korea, teachers are referred to as “nation builders.” In Finland, both men and women name teaching as among the top three most desirable professions for a spouse. Meanwhile, that old American saw—“Those who can’t do, teach”—continues to reverberate, reflecting elite condescension toward career educators.

I suspected that the key to understanding the American view of teachers lay in our history, and perhaps had something to do with the tension between our sky-high hopes for public education as the vehicle of meritocracy and our perennial unwillingness to fully invest in our public sector, teachers and schools included.

For 200 years, the American public has asked teachers to close troubling social gaps—between Catholics and Protestants; new immigrants and the American mainstream; blacks and whites; poor and rich. Yet every new era of education reform has been characterized by a political and media war on the existing teachers upon whom we rely to do this difficult work, often in the absence of the social supports for families that make teaching and learning most effective for kids, like stable jobs and affordable housing, childcare, and healthcare.

The 19th-century common school reformers depicted male teachers—90 percent of the classroom workforce in 1800—as sadistic, lash-wielding drunks who ought to be replaced by kinder, purer (and cheaper) women. During the Progressive Era, it was

working-class female teachers who were attacked, for lacking the masculine “starch” supposedly necessary to preside over 60-student classrooms of former child laborers. In the South during the civil rights era, *Brown v. Board of Education* prompted the racially motivated firings of tens of thousands of black teachers, as the Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations looked the other way. Then, at the height of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s, it was inner-city white teachers who were vilified, for failing to embrace parental control of schools and Afrocentric pedagogical theories.

Over the course of history, teachers have been embattled by politicians, philanthropists, intellectuals, business leaders, social scientists, activists on both the right and left, parents, and even by

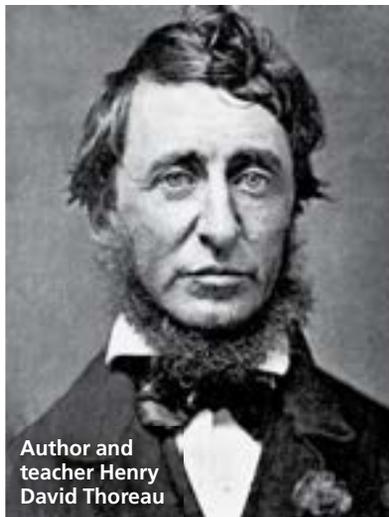
on poor people of color, today’s “bad teacher scare” employs all the classic features of a moral panic.

According to sociologists who study these events, in a moral panic, policymakers and the media focus on a single class of people (in our case, veteran public school teachers) as emblems of a large, complex social problem (socioeconomic inequality, as evidenced by educational achievement gaps). Then the media repeats, ad nauseam, anecdotes about the most despicable examples of this type of person (such as “rubber room” teachers, who collect pay, sometimes for years, while awaiting termination hearings on accusations of corporal punishment or alcoholism). This focus on the worst of the worst misrepresents the true scale and character of what may be a genuine problem.⁹

As a result, the public has gotten the message that public school teaching—especially urban teaching—is a broadly failed profession. The reality is concerning, but on a more modest scale: teacher-quality advocates estimate that somewhere between 2 and 15 percent of current teachers cannot improve their practice to an acceptable level and ought to be replaced each year.¹⁰

Far from confirming the perception that low-performing urban schools are uniformly bleak, talentless places, the latest research quantifies what history shows: that even the highest-poverty neighborhood schools in cities like New York and Los Angeles employ teachers who

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Author and teacher Henry David Thoreau

PHOTOGRAPH BY BENJAMIN D. MAXHAM

one another. Americans have debated who should teach public school, what should get taught, and how teachers should be educated, trained, hired, paid, evaluated, and fired. Though we’ve been arguing about these questions for two centuries, very little consensus has developed.

Amid these teacher wars, many extraordinary men and women worked in public school classrooms and offered powerful, grassroots ideas for how to improve American education. Henry David Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Lyndon B. Johnson are just a few of the famous Americans who taught. They resisted the fantasy of educators as saints or saviors, and understood teaching as a job in which the potential for children’s intellectual transcendence and social mobility, though always present, is limited by real-world concerns such as poor training, low pay, inadequate supplies, inept administration, and impoverished students and families. These teachers’ stories, and those of less-well-known teachers, propel this history forward and help us understand why American teaching has evolved into such a peculiar profession, one attacked and admired in equal proportion.

A Moral Panic

Today the ineffective tenured teacher has emerged as a feared character, a vampiric type who sucks tax dollars into her bloated pension and healthcare plans, without much regard for the children under her care. Like past conflagrations over crack babies or welfare queens, which exemplified anxiety over public spending

produce among the biggest test score gains in their regions. What’s more, veteran teachers who work long term in high-poverty schools with low test scores are actually more effective at raising student achievement than is the rotating cast of inexperienced teachers who try these jobs out but flee after one to three years.¹¹

The history of American education reform shows not only recurring attacks on veteran educators, but also a number of failed ideas about teaching that keep popping up again and again, like a whack-a-mole game at the amusement park. Over the past 10 years, cities from Atlanta to Austin to New York have experimented with paying teachers bonuses for higher student test scores. This type of merit pay was attempted in the 1920s, early 1960s, and 1980s. It never worked to broadly motivate teachers or advance outcomes for kids.

For over a century, school reformers have hoped that tweaking teacher rating systems would lead to more teachers being declared unfit and getting fired, resulting in an influx of better people into the profession. But under almost every evaluation system reformers have tried—rating teachers as good, fair, or poor; A, B, C, or D; satisfactory or unsatisfactory; or highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective—principals overburdened by paperwork and high teacher turnover ended up declaring that over 95 percent of their employees were just fine, indeed.¹² Fast-track teacher training programs like Teach for America, the Great Society-era Teacher Corps, and the 19th-century Board of National Popular Education are likewise a perennial feature of our school reform

landscape. They recruit ambitious people to the classroom, but on a small scale, and do not systemically improve instruction for kids.

History also shows that teacher tenure has been widely misunderstood. It is true that tenure protections make it costly, in both time and money, for schools to fire veteran teachers. That is because due process rights allow tenured teachers accused of poor performance to “grieve” their evaluations and terminations to an arbitrator, who can rule to send them back to the classroom.

Yet tenure predates collective bargaining for teachers by over half a century. Administrators granted teachers tenure as early as 1909, *before* unions were legally empowered at the negotiating table to demand this right. During the Progressive Era, both good government school reformers and then-nascent teachers unions supported tenure, which prevented teaching jobs from being used as political patronage and allowed teachers to challenge dismissals or demotions, once commonplace, based on gender, marital status, pregnancy, religion, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or political ideology. Tenure has long existed even in southern states where teachers are legally barred from collective bargaining.

Today it is usually assumed that teachers enjoy much more job security than workers in the private sector. Even if we set aside the nearly 50 percent of all beginner teachers who choose to leave the profession within five years—and ignore the evidence that those who leave are worse performers than those who stay—it is unclear whether teachers are formally terminated for *poor performance* any less frequently than are other workers. In 2007, the last year for which national data is available, 2.1 percent of American public school teachers were fired for cause, a figure that includes tenured teachers. Compared with federal workers, whom one study found are fired at an annual rate of .02 percent, teachers are exponentially more likely to be terminated. There is no comparable data from the private sector, because the Bureau of Labor Statistics groups layoffs with firings. But in 2012, companies with over a thousand employees, the closest private counterpart to large urban school systems, lost only about 2 percent of their workforce from firings, resignations, and layoffs combined.¹³

In some recent years, the number of new teachers hired—about 200,000 per year—equaled the total number of American college graduates minted by selective institutions (those that accept fewer than half of their applicants). The National Council on Teacher Quality estimates that high-poverty schools alone hire some 70,000 new teachers annually.¹⁴ Reformers sometimes claim that this huge demand for teachers is driven by overaggressive class size limits, and they argue for decreasing the number of teachers while raising class sizes and recruiting a smaller, more elite group to the profession.¹⁵ But the leading teacher demographer, Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania, has shown that the decrease in average elementary school class sizes since 1987, from 26 to 21 children, does not fully explain the “ballooning” of the teaching force.¹⁶

According to Ingersoll, there are two other factors that together account for a larger part of the change: first, the explosion in the number of students with high-needs special education diagnoses, such as autism spectrum disorders, and second, the increase in the number of high school students who enroll in math and science courses. Those trends are not likely ones we can or should

reverse. While teacher prep programs in regions with an oversupply of teachers should raise their admission standards or shut down, calls for 100 percent of American teachers to hail from selective colleges are, frankly, absurd—especially if we also lay off the bottom, say, 2 to 15 percent of teachers each year (66,000 to 495,000 people), as some reformers would like. Currently, just 10 percent of teachers come from the most selective colleges.¹⁷

Moreover, with the possible exception of high school-level math teachers, there is little evidence that better students make better teachers.¹⁸ Some nations, such as Finland, have been able to build a teaching force made up solely of star students. But other places, such as Shanghai, have made big strides in student achievement without drastically adjusting the demographics of who becomes a teacher. They do it by reshaping teachers’ working days so they spend less time alone in front of kids and more time planning lessons and observing other teachers at work, sharing best practices in pedagogy and classroom management.¹⁹

I have great sympathy for educators. American public school teaching has typically attracted individuals taking their first, tentative steps out of the working class, and one of them was my maternal grandfather, Harry Greene, a high school dropout. In his first career as a printer, he led a drive to organize a union at a nonunion shop, and for a while the fallout from that made it difficult for him to find work. When he was 52 years old, Harry finally earned an associate’s degree, and in 1965 began teaching vocational courses in New York City public high schools.

My dad, Steven Goldstein, was another first-generation college graduate who became a public school teacher. Always the jock (he attended Adelphi University on a soccer scholarship), my dad discovered he had a passion for history, too, and taught middle and high school social studies for 10 years before going into school administration, because he wanted to earn more money.

For me, the hostility directed at veteran teachers never rang true. In addition to being the daughter and granddaughter of educators, I attended public schools in Ossining, New York, with a diverse group of white, black, Latino, and Asian classmates. A few parents, like my mom, commuted down the Hudson River to New York City for corporate jobs; others were single mothers on public assistance or line cooks in the kitchen of our town’s maximum-security prison, Sing Sing. But regardless of whether they were college professors or home health aides, the most involved parents in Ossining wanted their kids in the classrooms of the most experienced teachers. My junior year math teacher, Mr. DiCarlucci, wore a full suit and tie every day, accessorized with blingy gold jewelry. Though he taught precalculus, he assigned research papers on high-level concepts like topology, to inspire us to stick with math over the long term. The white-haired Mr. Tunney guided English classes through dense classics like *All the King’s Men* with uncommon energy drawn from his infectious love for the books he taught. When teachers like that retired, the entire community mourned.

When I began reporting on education in 2007, I quickly learned how lucky I had been. Most American schools are socioeconomically segregated, very little like the integrated schools I attended in Ossining, where highly qualified teachers aspired to build long careers and to teach both middle-class and poor children. In 2005,

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the average high school graduation rate in the nation's 50 largest cities was just 53 percent, compared with 71 percent in the suburbs.²⁰ International assessments conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development show American schools are producing young adults who are less able than our counterparts in other developed nations to write coherently, read with understanding, and use numbers in day-to-day life. Even our most educated citizens, those with graduate degrees, are below world averages in math and computer literacy (though above average in reading).²¹

I do not believe schools are good enough the way they are. Nor do I believe that poverty and ethnic diversity prevent the United States from doing better educationally. Teachers and schools alone cannot solve our crisis of inequality and long-term unemployment, yet we know from the experience of nations like Poland that we don't have to eradicate economic insecurity to improve our schools.

What I do believe is that education reformers today should learn from the mistakes of history. We must focus less on how to rank and fire teachers and more on how to make day-to-day teaching an attractive, challenging job that intelligent, creative, and ambitious people will gravitate toward. We must quiet the teacher wars and support teachers in improving their skills and the profession. □

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