



California Federation of Teachers
American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

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In case you missed it...

The Sacramento Bee

Viewpoints: State's teachers are being scapegoated

By Gary Ravani

Special to The Bee

Linguist and activist [Noam Chomsky](#) once said, "Either you repeat the conventional doctrines everybody is saying, or else you say something true, and it will sound like it's from Neptune." Here are some things that are not conventional wisdom about public schools. They will sound like they're from Neptune, but they are true.

One pernicious assertion about the public schools is that it is exceptionally hard to get rid of "bad teachers" and that teacher "tenure" is a big problem in the state of California. In fact, teachers in the state don't have "tenure"; rather, following a two-year probation, during which they can be fired for any reason or no reason at all, they gain due process rights: the right to a hearing before being fired. A look at the statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics shows California releases 1 percent of its probationary teachers, with the national average being 0.7 percent. Permanent teachers are removed at the rate of 2 percent per year, with the national average at 1.4 percent.

In other words, California removes teachers at a greater rate than the rest of the nation, and, in fact, exceeds the rate of states without collective bargaining and due process rights for teachers.

Nearly half of new teachers in California leave the profession voluntarily within their first five years because they are dismayed at barriers to success such as the lack of resources. In other words, California has a bigger problem keeping teachers than getting rid of them. Yet legislation to further restrict teachers' due process rights has been introduced by the governor and anti-union legislators.

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The attacks on teachers are grounded in a number of urban myths. One of the most insidious is that we have a school dropout crisis. The [U.S. Census Bureau](#) delivered a press release in June of 2004 with the title: "High School Graduation Rates Reach All Time High: Non-Hispanic White and Black Graduates at Record Levels." Black graduation rates had increased by 10 percentage points from 1993 to 2003. Hispanics' rates rose by 11 percent in the same period.

The college graduation rate had also reached another historic high point. The latest numbers from the [U.S. Department of Labor](#) (April 2010) reveal the highest percentage ever of new high school graduates were enrolled in colleges last fall.

Although you hear hyperbolic statements about California's dropout rates, the reality, as reported by The Bee, which actually looked at the numbers reported by the [California Department of Education](#), is 18.9 percent; the national average is around 15 percent. This certainly can be improved on, but it doesn't deserve the hysterical reactions it seems to generate.

This picture contradicts the "conventional wisdom"; it sounds like it came from Neptune. It didn't. It came from government sources easily accessed via the Internet.

So why do national and state politicians (and the media, for that matter) ignore the reality and pump up the hysteria, keeping the public's attention focused on a symptom instead of causes?

Perhaps it's because the underlying problems are many, difficult and expensive. This begins with the state's low level of school funding, 46th in the nation on a per pupil basis. An education coalition recently filed a lawsuit calling the current school funding system unconstitutional for denying students the opportunity to master the educational program the state requires. Increasing numbers of students' families, particularly those of minority students, are falling into poverty and homelessness.

The U.S. Education Department reports that the number of schools where at least 75 percent of the students are eligible for free lunch has risen from 12 percent in 2000 to 17 percent in 2008 (prior to the full impact of the recession). The same report indicates that economic segregation of children has increased. Politicians ought to be fixated on these real problems. But it is much more convenient to scapegoat teachers.

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