



On Target

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AFT Local #2569

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Clarence Teachers Make the Difference

7 things I wish people understood about being a teacher

by Andrew Simmons on August 25, 2016

Before I decided to teach high school, I made a list of the things I enjoy doing: discussing books and movies, playing music, being around kids, basketball, cooking. I ruled out a few career paths immediately. I knew from working restaurant jobs as a teenager that the lifestyle of a chef wouldn't suit me. No professional basketball league was pathetic enough to let me in. I'd toured with some bands, but they were winding down, not up.

Soon, though, one profession emerged as an obvious choice: teaching. I envisioned sparking debates about important books and nurturing young writers. Maybe I'd even coach basketball or mentor teenage musicians. I entered UCLA's master's in education program and student-taught in Compton. Since then, I've worked at charter and public high schools in both Los Angeles and the Bay Area, teaching ninth, 10th, and 12th grade English, as well as journalism and, for one year, something heinous called "Grammar Lab." I have primarily worked with low-income students, although recently my classroom has diversified to include more affluent kids as well.

As a teacher, I've learned a lot about education, but it's also been a lens through which I've learned about everything else. Here are some important lessons I have taken away.

1) Teaching has made me smarter

Every year, I face 150 individuals with unique talents and backgrounds. Many will be first-generation college-goers. At home, some contend with abuse, addiction, gangs, and fractured families. I want them to leave my classroom smarter, kinder, and more self-possessed. I want their successes to contribute to a more equitable society. This effort inspires and challenges me. I know many of my teacher peers feel the same way.

Many years I teach the same books, but my approach depends on what's happening outside the classroom. This past year, I taught Toni Morrison's *Beloved* for the first time, using slave narratives, an excerpt from *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander, and articles examining the legacy of slavery in

America. We read about a new slavery museum and George Washington's documented obsession with pursuing runaway slaves.

Few of my Latino and white students had thought seriously about black identity and experience in America. This investigation was the goal of the unit, not simply getting through an important novel. In 2016, the unit will accommodate the aftermath of the Charleston shootings, including President Obama's eulogy, but who knows what else will beg for inclusion before March? I add a bookmark to the *Beloved* folder a few times a week.

To teach this way, I read and watch obsessively. I stir at 3 am with my mind racing and tap notes into my phone. Everything I learn is filtered through the possibility that it might be taught.

2) I became a much better teacher when I put my students in charge

When I started out, I saw teaching as a performance, a 10-month riff on a fluid script. I was good because I knew my stuff and could hold students' attention. That's not unusual: Many teachers have egocentric tendencies.

But if you rattle off 60-minute monologues peppered with witty asides, you might end up being not just a memorably strange teacher, but an ineffective one too.

While theatrics have a place, I learned that students learn best when class is interactive, a dialogue — not a one-sided transmission. At the end of my first year, I asked students for advice, and a precocious stoner wrote, "Make us talk more" in fat block letters on his suggestion card.

I'd learned this in grad school, of course, but I'd also placed a lot of stock in my ability to make a story like *The Odyssey* resonate with ninth-graders. I'd congratulated myself on cleverly painting Telemachus as a rebellious teen struggling with his absentee father's heavy shadow. I'd joked about rock star Odysseus's meandering 10-year tour home, complete with drugs and groupies. I'd noticed students laughing. I'd also seen them falling asleep.

Now I let students perform skits, create posters, and participate in panel discussions. I have them teach mini-lessons to the class. I wrap up the conversation with a flourish if necessary, but I let them drive most of the way home. This approach makes my students feel valuable (which too many teenagers don't) and helps build a community.

3) Standards like the Common Core do real harm in the wrong hands

I don't hate the new Common Core State Standards. The high school English standards make some sense when reasonably applied: English teachers should

teach a lot of nonfiction; teaching students how to think critically, argue, and support opinions is important; science and history classes should build reading and writing skills, too.

Still, the standards can be damaging when implemented irrationally.

Standards are too often treated as a replacement for what teachers once considered good teaching. The standards come with software, materials, curricula, and standardized tests. Consultants may come to school to explain what everyone should be doing in their classrooms.

Some administrators may demand to see a Common Core standard written on the board for every lesson and pop into class without warning to make sure it's there. They may require teachers to give more Common Core-aligned practice tests and examine the data to see if students (and teachers) are progressing. Meetings may end up addressing test data a lot more than the actual practice of teaching. In the frenzy, at some schools, at some point, talented, experienced teachers may lose classroom autonomy if, under increasingly watchful eyes, they can't jump through the new hoops fast enough.

4) Teachers act like teenagers

High school teachers spend so much time around teenagers that they sometimes start to act like them. They doodle and text in staff meetings, pass notes during assemblies, and chat over a district official's feeble defense of an unpopular software program. They gossip about administrators and other teachers. They gossip about students, too, though usually with affection or bewilderment as opposed to contempt. They bristle at a hint of micromanagement. They jam the copiers and slip out so they won't have to take responsibility for their actions.

Needless to say, these are all behaviors we'd condemn in our classes. But we engage in them anyway.

5) The cult of the superteacher has got to go

I was at a party in Los Angeles with a friend who knows some people in the film business. He introduced me to an agent who, upon discovering that I taught, brought up the documentary *Waiting for 'Superman,'* which follows the stories of children entering a charter school lottery. "The problem is the unions," he said, releasing his date's arm so he could gesticulate more exuberantly. "The movie explains it! Schools get stuck with the bad teachers! It's criminal!"

A Hollywood guy taking cues from a movie wasn't surprising. Too many people think the problem with education hinges on the laziness and incompetence of teachers.

Enter the cult of the superteacher.

Common at charter schools, would-be superteachers are smart, sometimes masochistic 23-year-olds working 18-hour days to pump up test scores for a few years before moving on to administrative positions, law school, or nervous breakdowns. They embrace an unsustainable load. They tutor on Saturdays. They come in two hours early and stay until 10 pm.

The cult thrived where I once taught. Teachers were given Superman shirts at a staff meeting. The lounge was decorated with posters of Spider-Man and the Avengers. These icons symbolized the ridiculous expectation that, like caped vigilantes protecting a whole city, individual teachers should single-handedly fix society's most pressing problems. I expect teachers to be great and reflect on ways to be greater. But when the school population swells by 30 percent in one year, with new ninth-graders coming in mostly from disastrously underperforming middle schools, making class sizes balloon, bad teaching isn't likely to blame for a dip in test scores.

The cult of the superteacher encourages young teachers to forgo sleep and free time in order to keep their jobs. Many burn out and quit before they've really learned how to teach. High teacher turnover means potentially good teachers abandon the profession. It also destroys schools' academic culture and rattles students.

In reality, students need more than a superteacher to succeed in school. Along with robust school budgets and well-prepared teachers, the real solution, especially for America's most marginalized students, includes livable wages, access to affordable child care, and law enforcement genuinely building trust in communities to make them safer. Reducing the problems in education to teacher performance ignores reality. Cults are all about that.

6) Summer vacations aren't really breaks

When teachers complain about lesson-planning marathons and stacks of papers to grade, non-teacher friends call attention to summer vacation. Sure, the school year is rough, the argument goes, but then you get two whole months off. Not working for two months surely makes up for working so hard the rest of the year.

Here's how summer vacation really unfolds for many of us.

For the first few weeks, we catch up on Netflix, read four or five books, stop shaving, drink beer in bed, enjoy air conditioning in excess, visit the pool, and text pictures of ourselves doing nothing to our non-teacher friends.

We go to the dentist and doctor.

In late June or early July, we travel somewhere. Halfway through the trip, we adopt austerity measures to make it through to our next paycheck in late September.

Then we read the emails our department head sent in late May. And that's when reality really sets in.

We're going to teach 10th grade, which we've never taught. We have to buy five new books, read them, take notes, build units and the skeletons of actual lessons, and find supplemental texts for each, as well — an article addressing the historical context, a poem commenting on a central theme, a documentary featuring the author. This all takes time.

When we're piloting a new class, taking on a different grade, or simply changing, for fun or necessity, what we teach, we end up working much of the summer. Teachers also attend summer conferences and professional trainings, often paying their own way.

Just like artists and entrepreneurs — or anyone deeply committed to what they do — most teachers don't stop working on vacation, even when they spend the other 10 months of the year logging 65 hours a week.

7) Teaching has made me a better person

Teaching is a humbling experience, an opportunity to be educated in empathy and human possibility. I have had to engage all manner of students — dark, teary kids who fill lined paper with open-hearted scribbles, gawky science dudes who can't speak in public without covering their eyes with a palm, recent immigrants working 30 hours a week to help support their families, angry kids with violent parents, kids who try, with hoodies and downcast eyes, to be invisible. I've had to accept that they do not always respond well to my efforts.

The temptation, of course, is to not devote so much attention to the challenging kids — to focus on the stellar athlete who shreds on the saxophone and grins like Tom Cruise circa 1986. Circa '86 Tom Cruise doesn't need anyone's help to become a doctor. He brims with self-assured charisma. I can't count the number of times I have heard a teacher marvel over a student who writes like a

graduate student with zero guidance. I marvel, too, at the teenage grad students.

But I've realized how important it is to make time for the vulnerable kids who can't hide their idiosyncrasies. When I was a kid, I was more like some of them than I was '86 Tom Cruise. The longer I teach, the more I remember how much I needed support and validation when I was their age — and the more I am compelled to give them that support, no matter how hard it can be sometimes.

I am pretty sure that most of my students benefit from the encouragement I give them. But I am absolutely certain that my work has dramatically changed the life of one person in particular: me. Since I became a teacher, I've grown much more patient with adults. When I played in bands, I alienated collaborators because I saw our partnership as an opportunity to impose my will. I was a raging control freak, agonizing over our songs and touring plans until I suffered anxiety attacks.

When I worked at law firms, I treated a partner with poor social skills with total disdain. If I was out at a bar with friends and a new acquaintance voiced an opinion I thought ridiculous, I said so, loudly.

Teaching, thankfully, has helped me judge everyone less readily. Now, in conversations, I try to talk less and listen more. I have realized that self-confidence and trust breed comfort and productivity in working relationships. Teaching may be about elevating the opportunities and talents of others, but I've still yet to find a better way to work toward becoming a better person.

Andrew Simmons is a high school teacher in California. He has written for the New York Times, the Atlantic, San Francisco Chronicle, and the Believer.

• Editor's Note

Each month the On Target will come out near the end of the month.

If you have something that you would like included, please send as a **Word document** by the 20th of the month to: lpunek@clarenceschools.org

Items that could be included are: **Articles** dealing with education/unions, **Good ideas for teaching**, something humorous/light dealing with education, **Information for sharing**, **Opinion pieces** on education, **Advertisement** for a service you provide.

Thank you,
Lisa Panek

America has a teacher shortage, and a new study says it's getting worse

By Joe Heim – The Washington Post

September 14, 2016 at 9:00 PM



Gardendale, Ala., high school biotech teacher Justin Ingram readies his classroom before school begins in August. A new study says the U.S. is headed toward a serious teacher shortage.(Linda Davidson/The Washington Post)

The United States is facing its first major teacher shortage since the 1990s, one that could develop into a crisis for schools in many parts of the country, according to a new study by the Learning Policy Institute, an education think tank.

The shortfall is a result of increased demand for teachers as schools reinstate classes and programs axed during the Great Recession. It has been compounded by a dramatic decrease in the supply of new teachers entering the profession. Enrollment in teacher-preparation programs dropped from 691,000 in 2009 to 451,000 in 2014, a 35 percent decline, according to the study, “A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand and Shortages in the U.S.”

“Our analysis estimates that U.S. classrooms were short approximately 60,000 teachers last year,” Leib Satcher, the study’s co-author, told reporters Tuesday ahead of the study’s release. “Unless we can shift these trends, annual teacher shortages could increase to over 100,000 teachers by 2018 and remain close to that level thereafter.”

The impact of the teacher shortage on students, according to the study’s authors, will be schools having to cancel courses, increase class sizes and teacher-pupil ratios, or hire underprepared teachers.

Although nearly every state has reported teacher shortages to the U.S. Department of Education, the problem is much more pronounced in some states than others. But across the country, the shortages are disproportionately felt in special education, math and science, and in bilingual and English-language education.

Regardless of the state, students in high-poverty and high-minority schools are typically hit hardest when there are teacher shortages. In 2014, on average, less than one percent of teachers were uncertified in low-minority schools, while four times as many were uncertified in high-minority schools, the study showed.

Teacher attrition — the number of teachers leaving the profession for a variety of reasons — remains high and is the single-biggest contributor to the shortage, according to the report. Nearly two-thirds of the teachers who leave the profession do so before retirement age and cite dissatisfaction with their job as the reason. Addressing the job-dissatisfaction issues could help avert a teacher crisis.

“In times of shortage, policymakers often focus attention on how to get more teachers into the profession, but it’s equally important to focus on how to keep the teachers we do have,” Satcher said. “Reducing attrition in half, from eight percent to four percent, would virtually eliminate overall shortages.”

Linda Darling-Hammond, president of the Learning Policy Institute and one of the study’s co-authors, pointed out that teachers make about 20 percent less than other college graduates and that teacher salaries have lost ground since the 1990s. That despite increased teaching hours and less time for classroom preparation.

“In more than 30 states, a mid-career teacher heading a family of four is eligible for government assistance,” she said.

Darling-Hammond recommended increased pay, compensation packages that could include housing and child care, and forgivable loans as some of the ways to improve teacher retention.

The study, based on federal data sets and more than a year in the works, received acclaim from powerful political figures on the education front.

“This research underscores the importance of offering effective incentives to keep our best teachers in the profession, contributing their expertise to help others,” Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, said in a statement.

Former education secretary and South Carolina governor Richard W. Riley concurred.

“The teaching workforce is so critical to our future, and what we see here is the data we need to help us move forward with thoughtful, effective strategies,” he said.

An accompanying report, “Minority Teacher Recruitment, Employment, and Retention: 1987 to 2013,” looked specifically at the effort to increase the number of minority teachers in schools.

“Teacher turnover is especially high in poor and disadvantaged schools,” said Richard Ingersoll, that report’s author. “What the data tell us is that we need to focus on more recruitment of minority teachers but also more retention of minority teachers if we ever want to have the teaching force look like the student population in schools.”

Although compensation was a factor for minority teachers, it wasn’t the only one, Ingersoll said.

“We need to work on working conditions,” he said. “Among the key conditions that drive out minority teachers are a lack of autonomy and discretion in the classroom.”

• **Count How Many Teachers are on Board...**

U.S. Education Secretary John B. King Jr. Names Six Education Leaders to National Assessment Governing Board

September 23, 2016

Contact: Stephaan Harris, 202-357-7504, stephaan.harris@ed.gov

Press Office, (202) 401-1576, press@ed.gov

WASHINGTON — U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. announced today that six education leaders from around the country have been appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB) to serve four-year terms. The new members include two state legislators, a testing and measurement expert, a local school board member, a non-public school leader and a general public representative.

The appointees will help set policy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as The Nation's Report Card. NAEP offers objective data on student performance in nearly a dozen subjects to the public and to education policymakers at the national, state and local levels. The information NAEP provides helps education stakeholders evaluate the progress of American education. The 26-member nonpartisan Governing Board determines the subjects and content NAEP tests, sets the achievement levels for reporting and publicly releases the results.

“We are honored to welcome these exceptional education leaders to the Board,” King said. “The Board plays a vital role in helping to shape education in our country, and their perspectives and insights will be major assets in strengthening the status of The Nation's Report Card as the gold standard for measuring academic achievement.”

Four leaders were reappointed along with two new state legislators, whose terms begin Oct. 1, 2016, and end Sept. 30, 2020. The new and reappointed Governing Board members, along with the roles they represent, are listed below:

- **Rebecca Gagnon** (Minneapolis — local school board member): Gagnon serves as treasurer on the Minneapolis Public Schools Board of Education and joined the Governing Board in 2012. Gagnon was re-elected to her seat on the Minneapolis School Board — which oversees 75 schools and 36,000 students — in 2015, and will represent the local district until 2019. She also chairs the Governing Board's Reporting and Dissemination Committee.

- **Andrew Ho** (Boston — testing and measurement expert): Ho joined the Governing Board in 2012 and is a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he conducts psychometric research on accountability metrics and teaches courses involving educational measurement and statistics. He chairs the Governing Board’s Committee on Standards, Design and Methodology. A recipient of numerous national awards and fellowships, he was also a member of The Future of NAEP panel, to which he was appointed by the commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics.
- **Terry Mazany** (Chicago — general public representative): Selected as chair of the Governing Board in 2014 and serving as a member since 2012, Mazany is the president and CEO of The Chicago Community Trust. The Trust, one of the nation’s largest community foundations, recently celebrated its 100th anniversary serving the residents of the Chicago metropolitan area.
- **Jeanette Nuñez** (Miami — Republican state legislator): Nuñez has served as Florida’s state representative for District 119 since 2012, and represented District 112 from 2010 to 2012. In 2007, Nuñez was named a Hispanic Woman of Distinction of South Florida for her volunteerism and dedication to her community.
- **Joseph O’Keefe** (New York City — nonpublic school administrator or policymaker): O’Keefe, a Jesuit priest and visiting professor at Fordham University, has been a leader in the Catholic education community and a scholar of faith-related schools in the U.S. and abroad, with several faculty appointments. He has been a Governing Board member since 2012.
- **Alice Peisch** (Wellesley, Massachusetts — Democratic state legislator): Peisch serves as the state representative for Massachusetts’ 14th Norfolk District and as the Joint Committee on Education’s House chair, a post she has held since 2011. In her role as chair, Peisch works on matters relating to education, from birth through grade 12.

These members take office as the Governing Board is involved in several important initiatives, including releasing the 2015 NAEP Science Assessment results in late October 2016, developing a strategic vision to expand the visibility and influence of NAEP, and releasing the 2016 NAEP Arts Assessment results in spring 2017.

“These dedicated individuals are exactly the kind of members we need at the forefront of assessment innovation,” Governing Board Chair Terry Mazany said. “We look forward to collaborating with them over the next four years.”

The Governing Board is now accepting nominations for terms that begin October 2017 for these open positions: an elementary school principal, two general public representatives, and a testing and measurement expert. To learn more and submit a nomination, visit www.nagb.org/nominations. Nominations are due by Oct. 28, 2016.

• Recess Time

Recess is becoming extinct at schools across the nation, but one Long Island district is going in the other direction.

By [Ryan Bonner \(Patch National Staff\)](#) - September 13, 2016 8:23 am ET

Elementary school students in the Patchogue-Medford School District will be spending a bit more time on the playground this year as recess has been doubled from 20 to 40 minutes.

"The Patchogue-Medford School District officially launched a groundbreaking and revolutionary measure to improve on its approach to educating the whole child," the district wrote on its Facebook page last week.

Among the key points are a major shift in structured and unstructured play in kindergarten through second grade, the doubling of recess time to 40 minutes per day in kindergarten through fifth grade, collaborative project based learning, an increased amount of social workers and psychologists in all schools, as well as the implementation of yoga and meditation in kindergarten through eighth grade, among other initiatives.

"This is the year of the whole child in this great school district," said Patchogue-Medford Superintendent Michael Hynes, an outspoken critic of Common Core and standardized testing. "Some of the things we're going to focus on are the social, emotional, physical and cognitive needs of all of our students. We're going to start to look at, from a structural standpoint, aspects of play, yoga, meditation, and most notably project-based learning. Our school board and

administration are completely aligned on these groundbreaking measures that will continue to define our school district as a beacon for progressive educational fundamentals and values.”

The move would likely draw support from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which in a policy statement has said recess is a "necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development.

"Even with ample evidence of a whole-child benefit from recess, significant external pressures, such as standardized cognitive testing mandated by educational reforms, have led some to view recess as time that would be better spent on academics," the AAP says. "Time previously dedicated to daily activity in school, such as physical education and recess, is being reallocated to make way for additional academic instruction.

"Ironically, minimizing or eliminating recess may be counterproductive to academic achievement, as a growing body of evidence suggests that recess promotes not only physical health and social development but also cognitive performance."

While sure to be a hit with students, not everyone is a fan of increasing recess time.

"Recess should be 15 minutes, and school should be about learning, and it should be about discipline, and it should be about improving a child," Fred Gorman, a member of Long Islanders for Educational Reform, told ABC 7.

• Are Teachers the Real Problem?

Answer Sheet

The real problem isn't teachers

By Valerie Strauss June 30



In April, an appeals court in California upheld the state's laws regarding teacher tenure, dismissal and layoffs by overturning a lower court's earlier decision to scrap job-protection statutes in the highly publicized *Vergara v. California* case. The plaintiffs in *Vergara* were public school students backed by a school reform advocacy group called Students Matter, and they claimed that job protection laws for teachers are the reason that poor and minority children wind up with more ineffective teachers who are hard to fire. The court found that "the evidence did not show that the challenged statutes inevitably cause" the impact the plaintiffs claimed. Reform and anti-union activists have promised to continue the legal fight against teacher job protection laws that they say work against students.

Such legal challenges are just part of what many teachers consider to be a war on their profession by school reformers and policymakers who have attempted

to “disrupt” public education with systems and programs that educators think rob them of their professionalism and hurt the learning process.

Teachers unions again made national news this week when the Supreme Court denied a petition from plaintiffs in *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association* to rehear the case. A group of California teachers had challenged a law that they said violates their First Amendment rights by requiring them to pay dues to the state’s teachers union. California is one of about 20 states in which public employees are required to either join the union or pay a fee to support the union’s collective-bargaining activities — which support all workers, whether or not they are union members.

With this decision, it seems to be a good time to look again at how teachers are faring. Here’s a post about how and why teachers have become scapegoats for problems in public education and what should be done to change the dynamic. It was written by Alexander W. Wiseman, associate professor and director of the Comparative and International Education (CIE) program at Lehigh University’s College of Education. He has more than 20 years of professional experience working with government education departments, university-based teacher education programs, community-based professional development for teachers and as a classroom teacher in both the United States and East Asia.

By Alexander W. Wiseman

Recent U.S. education reform efforts — such as the *Vergara vs. California* lawsuit filed on behalf of nine students and similar suits in Minnesota and New York — point to teacher job protections negotiated by unions as a root cause of a troubling reality: unequal access to high-quality education. But this is at the least a distraction and at the most a purposeful misdirection of attention from the real problem.

Critics argue that the rules governing the hiring and firing of teachers, such as tenure, have the unintended consequence of burdening the most economically disadvantaged schools with the least effective or prepared teachers, thereby providing a sub-par education to the very students who need public education the most.

It does not take an expert to spot the absurdity of blaming the unequal distribution of highly effective teachers for the fundamental inequalities that pervade American society. Unequal access — to education, to jobs, to bathrooms, for goodness sake — because of one’s race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, geography or nationality pervades our society. The

damage inflicted on our young people as a result of these inequities vastly outweighs the ill effects of a handful of bad teachers.

Teachers are such easy scapegoats. Having worked in and with education systems in the United States, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, South Africa, and Germany, I can confidently declare teacher shaming to be a worldwide phenomenon. In this country, myths depicting teachers as either lazy clock-punchers or rousing saviors — chronicled recently in a New York Times article, “Why teachers on TV have to be either incompetent or inspiring” — only serve to perpetuate the idea that if a kid fails to learn, his teacher is wholly to blame.

The high-profile lawsuits in California, Minnesota and New York have raised two important questions:

One, how much responsibility for unequal education can be reasonably laid at the feet of public schools and teachers — and how much belongs to the broader community for failing to dismantle persistent and durable barriers to equal opportunity such as poverty, systemic racism and income inequality?

Two, is the way we currently measure teacher quality helpful, or even accurate?

Given pursuits such as the *Vergara* trial, it seems clear that the balance between a school’s responsibility and the community’s is currently too heavily weighted in the school’s direction. When it comes to addressing the challenges we face as a nation, access to high quality education must be a part of the solution — but it cannot be the whole package.

For example, access to a good education is not going to make up for the fact that mom and dad lack jobs or that their full-time jobs do not pay enough to keep the family clothed, housed, healthy, and fed. The highest-quality teachers in the world do not have the power to lift an individual student out of poverty if the country’s system of wealth distribution is rigged against her. Teachers and public schools are not equipped to end the systemic racism that underlies the fact that five times more young black men are shot dead by U.S. police than young white men and that one in three black men can expect to go to prison in their lifetime. There are some problems in the community that cannot be surmounted by education alone, yet education and teachers are persistently portrayed as a panacea for all of society’s ills.

Collectively, we are failing to accurately measure teacher quality and, thus, failing to help teachers succeed. The current discourse on teacher quality focuses disproportionately on teachers’ influence on students’ test scores. Test scores are only one piece of the larger picture of teacher and student success.

Positive changes in a student's attitude toward a subject, as well as increased confidence, is linked with improved academic success and must be included in any assessment of teaching quality.

Context also plays an important role in a teacher's craft and is rarely considered. What are teachers doing in the classroom? How are they teaching? Are they simply babysitting or are they helping their students to engage the curriculum? And, are they modifying it for the students depending on their needs?

In addition, a teacher's background — socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, level of education, whether they are teaching in the field in which they are trained — as well as the backgrounds of his or her students come into play. Incorporating some of these factors into teacher evaluations would not only allow for a more complete assessment of a teacher's quality than test scores alone, it would also provide a professional development road map by which to help teachers training and improvement.

If we want highly effective teachers in every classroom, we must re-balance the scales, admit that teachers and schools can bear only so much of the responsibility for unequal access to education, and accept that some of the fault is in our collective failure to provide equal opportunity.

For U.S. education to live up to its promise as "the greater equalizer," we must abolish outdated ideas that teachers are either incompetent or Jaime Escalante. Developing an evaluation system focused on helping teachers succeed is one way to start.

September 16, 2016

Schools' water to be tested under new state law

Author: By Liza Frenette
Source: NYSUT Communications

New York has a new law requiring schools to test their drinking water for lead contamination. The law, recently signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, includes emergency regulations requiring districts to perform testing by Oct. 31. Pre-K-through-5 school buildings are being required to test by the end of this month.

Results must be reported to parents, the state Department of Health and local government officials. Reports to the DOH will be through a designated statewide electronic reporting system.

School water fountains, which are as ubiquitous as hall lockers, will now be under scrutiny until proven safe. The tight deadlines are set to demand action.

The announcement of the new law comes just as Voorheesville, a Capital Region school district, was found to have high levels of lead in its water.

Prior to the enactment of this new law, there were no state or federal statutes mandating this testing to ensure the safety of the water available to school students, teachers, health care professionals and School-Related Professionals.

"NYSUT lobbied strongly for this legislation, which requires public schools and BOCES in New York State to test for lead contamination at the tap and requires that parents and school staff are informed of the results," said Andy Pallotta, NYSUT executive vice president in charge of the union's legislative efforts. "The landmark legislation also provides some state funding for testing and remediation for any contamination found, and includes a common-sense provision to ensure that safe drinking water is provided to the school until any contamination is corrected."

According to the law: "If lead levels are detected above 15 parts per billion at any potable water outlet, the school must discontinue use of that outlet, implement a lead remediation plan to mitigate the lead level and provide building occupants with an adequate alternate supply of water for cooking and drinking."

Any testing that shows results more than the acceptable levels must be reported within one business day to the local health department. Schools must post on their website as soon as possible – and no more than six weeks after receiving lab results.

During the past year, lead contamination has been detected in the Flint, MI, water supply and in Newark, NJ. In addition to Voorheesville, contaminated water has been found in Hoosick Falls and Ithaca.

These communities, Pallotta pointed out, had no reason to suspect there were any issues with their municipal water sources.

"The problem was not realized until it was too late and many residents began to fall ill," Pallotta said. "Parents send their children to school with the assumption that the drinking water is safe. The enactment of this legislation provides the means for schools to guarantee safe drinking water for children and for our members."

For new schools that begin operations after the effective date of the new regulation, initial water samples must be performed prior to occupancy.

Any schools that tested after Jan. 1, 2015 and are in compliance do not need to retest.

Schools will be required to collect samples "every five years, at a minimum, after initial testing or at a time determined by the commissioner of health," according to Gov. Cuomo's office.

Prior to this law, testing was voluntary.

NYSUT Vice President Paul Pecorale, who oversees health and safety for the union, called the legislation "significant."

"We all witnessed what transpired in Flint, MI and other places around the country, including places in our own backyard like Hoosick Falls and Ithaca. Safe water should be a fundamental expectation we should have, especially when we are sending people to schools," Pecorale said. "Testing water should have been a requirement in the past. Now that it is, we can be assured of safe water in our schools or if there is a diagnosis of a problem, it should be quickly fixed."

It is of note that, because schools have intermittent water use patterns, the water often has prolonged contact with plumbing materials that can lead to elevated levels of lead.

For testing purposes, the water must be taken from a cold water supply where water has been motionless in the pipes for at least eight hours but not more than 18.