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Profession, Teacher



Danielle Adams 4-11-12 Tenure: A Student Stalemate “ Carpe Diem. Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary. ” Mr. John Keating in Dead Poets Society (1989). Time and time again, Hollywood has presented the power and influence a good teacher can have on the lives of young students. Most of us have had an influential teacher at least once in our lives. Imagine what we could have become if all our teachers had been willing to pull extra weight to help us achieve our full potential. In today's society, the public school system for K-12 is failing. America has become in the lowest percentile in the world for math and science. How can this be in a country with so many freedoms and advantages? Perhaps one of the largest factors in the failing school system is the lack of good teachers. At the head of this crashing train is tenure. We need to rid public school systems of tenure, implement more aggressive evaluation processes for educators, and reward or discipline teachers according to their achievements in the classroom. America's public school system would be better off eliminating tenure and implementing a two tier system based on teacher merit. Thousands of low-performing teachers in the American school system are being supported and encouraged by tenure. Tenure focuses on the welfare of the teachers, not the students. But that is backwards. Teaching should be about the students, not the individuals being paid to educate them. We are providing our educators with protection when we should be providing protection for the pupils. President Barack Obama said, “ It's time to start rewarding good teachers, stop making excuses for bad ones... I reject a system that rewards failure and protects a person from its consequences. ”[1] The system he rejects is our current system. If we're going to provide our children with the

best education possible we need to stop teacher mediocrity. America has one of the largest education budgets in the world.[2] So why is it that 70% of 8th graders cannot read proficiently? Why is it that approximately 1. 2 million Americans today drop out of high school every year?[3] As more money is being fed into the education budget every year, student achievement is still not improving. This education problem is hurting our economy[4] and ineffective teaching is largely to blame. It is crucial that we provide our children with the best possible education, especially if we expect to compete with other nations. Tenure for grades K-12 was originally created to protect teachers from arbitrarily being fired. Before tenure, teachers could be fired for their religious or political beliefs, or for the way they lived their lives. Tenure was intended to ensure a teacher was only terminated when he or she failed to meet a requirement clearly defined by educational standards given by the school. But what was once used as a way to protect effective teachers for being unjustly fired has become a protection for ineffective teachers to lack in their profession. The need for tenure and its protections has passed. Every American professional today is protected by law against unfair unemployment practices.[5] This includes one being fired for their religious or political beliefs. In the airline business, pilots rarely receive the job security of permanent contracts.[6] In the medical field, doctors can easily lose their medical licenses for numerous types of misconduct, permanently losing their ability to work as a doctor.[7] Both pilots and doctors are trusted with our children's lives in their hands, just as teachers are. And yet, pilots, doctors and other such professionals aren't given the same kind of job security. So, as Larry Rosenstock, CEO of eight California

charter schools has asked: " What is it that is so exceptional about teachers that they should have this unique right? "[8] Many in favor of tenure argue that tenure is a way to attract and keep more qualified teachers which increases the efficiency of schools. Tenure, defenders argue, makes the teaching profession more attractive because it provides job security by eliminating political favoritism during the hiring and firing process. However, tenure creates an obstacle course for administrators trying to fire inefficient teachers. When asked, about 86% of administrators said they don't usually pursue firing ineffective teachers.[9] They don't because the firing process is time consuming and costly, and most outcomes are unsuccessful in firing these individuals. Good teachers' jobs would be just as safe without tenure; bad teachers hide behind it. It is the responsibility of the school board members and administrators to secure effective teachers in their schools. Unfortunately, their hands are all too often tied by the tenure laws preventing them from taking action to remove teachers unfit to teach in their schools. We would be better off without tenure as a tool to herd thousands of incompetent individuals into the education field. To add to the problem of administrators being unable to fire inadequate teachers, teachers are granted tenure almost automatically after as short as two years of teaching. Some states don't even set specific teacher requirements or standards to attain tenure. Teachers are receiving the lifetime security of tenure for as little as only two years of work. Obtaining tenure for teachers in K-12 is much less difficult than for professors in the university system. College professors usually gain tenure based on their published research and contributions. Not only that, but their probationary periods can last as long as ten years.[10]

Hong Kong, which is ranked #2 in the world for science and #3 in the world for math,[11] does offer tenure, but the probation period to gain tenure is much more difficult than in the U. S. and their evaluations on performance development is much harsher than in the U. S.[12] Teacher evaluations used to grant tenure in the K-12 schools systems are usually rushed and sometimes non-existent. This is because many administrators feel overwhelmed by their workload and find evaluations to be tedious. Because of this, the evaluations may not be an accurate reflection of a teacher's work or effectiveness. These evaluations have essentially become useless. Tenure is practically given to any teacher who stays long enough to obtain it.[13] Quality teachers go unrecognized and ineffective teachers go unaddressed. This is disrespectful to both the effective teachers as well as the students. It is important to note that tenure is not the only problem with the K-12 school system. By eliminating tenure we aren't eliminating problems like class size, poverty, student violence and negligent or uninvolved parents. Many teachers in inner city schools speak of the difficulties they face in trying to teach or handle students who are assaulting them or who are eight months pregnant. Issues outside of the school, like poverty or abuse, stunt a child's ability to concentrate and learn in class. The only push for help being offered by politicians is for more money or easier ways for parents to send their children to private institutions. Many of these politicians involved in trying to solve these problems within the school district seem like, as Amanda Ripley of Time Magazine says, “ diplomats touring a refugee camp and talking about the need for nicer curtains. ”[14] Tenure is not the only problem with the K-12 school system, but it is the most powerful tool preventing us from

removing ineffective teachers. So how do we decide who makes an effective teacher? Some feel the most effective way to measure a teacher's success is through standardized testing. If a student's test score improves with a teacher, the teacher is doing their job effectively. If the test scores don't improve or even worsen, then the opposite is true: the teacher is not doing their job appropriately. It is with the help of this data that we could properly evaluate teachers, and in effect, properly reward or discipline them.

According to research by Eric Hanushek at Stanford University, if an average child is assigned an effective teacher while an equally average child is assigned a weak teacher, their lives will diverge in only a few years. The child with the effective teacher will score above grade level while the other child with the ineffective teacher will score below grade level. As studies have shown, students who fall behind usually never catch up.[15] Just as tenure is not the only problem with the school system, standardized testing is not the only sign of an effective teacher. Many people disagree with the idea that standardized testing proves that effective teaching is taking place. They argue that the tests don't measure achievement adequately, are unreliable, and only reflect a small sample of student behavior and learning. Standardized testing may not be the most effective way to test a student's learning, but it is an objective way to measure it and is currently the most effective way to gauge a student's math and science understanding.

Students should first be proven to have basic skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic before they can begin to explore their creativity in more obscure learning. As it has been made known, not all teachers are equally effective. We need to start rewarding impressive teaching achievements and

stop protecting mediocrity. By commending, paying, disciplining, and dismissing teachers according to their teaching results we would be helping to ensure good teaching as the standard. A merit based pay system, which would evaluate teachers over a set time, should be instilled. Performance pay systems, which are based upon goals agreed upon at the beginning of the year, have been proven to be less effective. They are less effective because teachers have been found to do the bare minimum to achieve their goals instead of focusing on achieving an above average job overall. In Houston and Florida, these performance pay systems have already failed.

[16] Michelle Rhee, chancellor of Washington D. C. public schools believes in a two tier system. She believes that if teachers were properly rewarded, student achievement would naturally follow.[17] The two tier system she has coined would give teachers the option to give up their tenure job security in exchange for the potential to earn a higher salary. If they did not choose this option, they would maintain their tenure rights and keep earning the same amount they are currently earning. The average teacher salary in the US in 2011 was \$54, 220.[18] Teachers who opt for a potentially higher salary would be paid on merit based pay and could earn upwards to \$135, 000: over double their current pay. I propose that we implement a two tier system similar to chancellor Rhee's which would give teachers a choice between their tenure rights and better pay. One of the focuses of this plan is that we would be giving teachers a voice. While students should be the main priority, it is important to note that teachers are not the enemy. Teacher's rights are protected because we are allowing them to decide which plan they would like to live by. Offering teachers better pay will increase student

achievement because better pay will attract more qualified individuals into the teaching profession. More qualified educators means a higher quality curriculum and better teaching methods. Teachers, like all humans, need to suffer the consequences of their actions, whether they be good or bad. Tenure is no longer needed to protect teachers from unjust discrimination. But, if tenure is to be granted, it should be harder to obtain: a type of job security granted after many years of hard work and contribution to the student's education as well as the school itself. Just as it is a student's best interest to earn good grades, it should be a teacher's best interest to earn better pay which parallels their teaching results. Without tenure, America's schools system will not be completely void of problems, but it will significantly increase student achievement. So let's "carpe diem." Let's "seize the day." Let's make the lives of students in America extraordinary.

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