

You made it personal: We are not the enemy

Seven state-honored teachers protest Gov. Cuomo's educational leadership
Updated 9:55 am, Monday, February 9, 2015

The following article was written by seven New York state Teachers of the Year: Ashli Dreher (2014, Buffalo); Katie Ferguson (2012, Schenectady); Jeff Peneston (2011, Syracuse); Rich Ognibene (2008, Rochester); Marguerite Izzo (2007, Malverne); Steve Bongiovi (2006, Seaford); and Liz Day (2005, Mechanicville)

Dear Governor Cuomo: We are teachers. We have given our hearts and souls to this noble profession. We have pursued intellectual rigor. We have fed students who were hungry. We have celebrated at student weddings and wept at student funerals. Education is our life. For this, you have made us the enemy. This is personal.

Under your leadership, schools have endured the Gap Elimination Adjustment and the tax cap, which have caused layoffs and draconian budget cuts across the state. Classes are larger and support services are fewer, particularly for our neediest students.

We have also endured a difficult rollout of the Common Core Standards. A reasonable implementation would have started the new standards in kindergarten and advanced those standards one grade at a time. Instead, the new standards were rushed into all grades at once, without any time to see if they were developmentally appropriate or useful.

Then our students were given new tests — of questionable validity — before they had a chance to develop the skills necessary to be successful. These flawed tests reinforced the false narrative that all public schools — and therefore all teachers — are in drastic need of reform. In our many years of teaching, we've never found that denigrating others is a useful strategy for improvement.

Now you are doubling down on test scores as a proxy for teacher effectiveness. The state has focused on test scores for years and this approach has proven to be fraught with peril. Testing scandals erupted. Teachers who questioned the validity of tests were given gag orders. Parents in wealthier districts hired test-prep tutors, which exacerbated the achievement gap between rich and poor.

Beyond those concerns, if the state places this much emphasis on test scores who will want to teach our neediest students? Will you assume that the teachers in wealthier districts are highly effective and the teachers in poorer districts are ineffective, simply based on test scores?

Most of us have failed an exam or two along life's path. From those results, can we conclude that our teachers were ineffective? We understand the value of collecting data, but it must be interpreted wisely. Using test scores as 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation does not meet this criterion.

Your other proposals are also unlikely to succeed. Merit pay, charter schools and increased scrutiny of teachers won't work because they fundamentally misdiagnose the problem. It's not that teachers or schools are horrible. Rather, the problem is that students with an achievement gap also have an income gap, a health-care gap, a housing gap, a family gap and a safety gap, just to name a few. If we truly want to improve educational outcomes, these are the real issues that must be addressed.

Much is right in public education today. We invite you to visit our classrooms and see for yourself. Most teachers, administrators and school board members are doing quality work. Our students and alumni have accomplished great things. Let's stop the narrative of systemic failure.

Instead, let's talk about ways to help the kids who are struggling. Let's talk about addressing the concentration of poverty in our cities. Let's talk about creating a culture of family so that our weakest students feel emotionally connected to their schools. Let's talk about fostering collaboration between teachers, administrators and elected officials. It is by working together, not competing for test scores, that we will advance our cause.

None of these suggestions are easily measured with a No. 2 pencil, but they would work. On behalf of teachers across the state, we say these are our kids, we love them, and this is personal.