Elevating the Teaching Profession

By Arne Duncan

A little more than a half-century ago, in 1958, Senator John F. Kennedy penned a piece for the *NEA Journal*. In it, the future president urged a number of reforms to the teaching profession. As a longtime supporter of the NEA, Kennedy felt that higher pay and more classrooms were not enough—"more and better teachers are also needed." To strengthen the teaching profession, JFK wrote, "we must find better means for providing better rewards for our better teachers. We must make actual use of probationary periods to retain only those with satisfactory performance records, and we must demonstrate concretely to young beginners in the field that real opportunities for advancement await those whose contribution is of the highest caliber."

Flash forward a quarter century, and Al Shanker, the legendary head of the American Federation of Teachers, was echoing JFK's warning. In his 1984 address to the AFT Convention, Shanker suggested that "one possibility is that we will improve the profession ourselves and find ways of selecting and training teachers—and yes, even some ways of removing people who shouldn't be in the profession." Shanker recognized that change would not be easy or happen overnight. But he declared that "the professionalization of teaching in the next 10 or 20 years is life or death for the future of public education."

Unfortunately, JFK's and Al Shanker's calls to strengthen the teaching profession ring all too familiar today. Like President Kennedy and Al Shanker, President Obama and I believe deeply that good teachers are unsung heroes. We know exemplary teachers toil late into the night on lesson plans, shell out of their own pocket to pay for supplies, and wake up worrying when one of their students seems headed for trouble.

People remember their favorite teacher decades later because great teachers change the course of a student's life. They light a lifelong curiosity, teaching students to solve problems like a scientist, write like a novelist, listen like a poet, see like an artist, and observe like a journalist. It is no surprise that the single biggest influence on student growth is the quality of the teacher standing in the front of the classroom.

Teaching, in short, should be one of the nation's most revered professions. Teachers should be amply compensated, fairly evaluated, and supported by topnotch professional development. Yet teachers today are not accorded the respect they deserve—and teaching is still not treated as a profession on par with other highly skilled professions. The unavoidable question is, why? Why, 25 years after Al Shanker's admonition and 50 years after JFK's plea, are teachers still not treated like true professionals?

The answer, I believe, is that we have a broken system—a system of training, induction, evaluation, professional development, and promotion that is an artifact from an earlier era. As Al Shanker pointed out, schools today are still largely stuck in the factory model of the industrial age. Students, in classrooms that look uncannily like the classrooms of a century ago, move through 13 years of schooling beginning at age five, attending school 180 days a year, and taking five subjects a day in timed periods similar to what the Carnegie Foundation recommended in 1910.

Teacher promotion and compensation policies are based on equally outdated conceptions of K–12 education. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the first tenure law, passed by New Jersey in 1909. The single-salary pay schedule got its start in 1921, nearly 90 years ago, in Des Moines and Denver.

In the factory model of education, teachers are treated as interchangeable widgets who keep the educational assembly line moving. Teachers today are not paid based on their skill in the classroom or the difficulty of their teaching assignments. If two teachers have comparable experience and credentials, they are paid the same—even if one teacher is the Teacher of the Year and the other instructor

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is the weakest teacher at her school. As Al Shanker summed up, teachers continue to be treated "as workers in an old fashioned factory who may not exercise judgment and discretion, [and] who are supervised and directed by everyone from the state legislature down to the school principal. Our schools are organized today exactly the way they were a century ago."

A century ago, when teachers could be fired willy-nilly, tenure protection and the single-salary schedule provided teachers with vital safeguards against arbitrary dismissals by principals and school boards. Yet in 2009, while teachers still need processes that assure fair treatment, it no longer makes sense to treat teachers as widgets. The teaching profession will never receive the respect it deserves, so long as teachers are perceived as indistinguishable components of the educational assembly line.

The Obama administration is committed to strengthening the teaching profession, from teacher preparation, to induction, professional development, and retention, especially in high-poverty schools and for high-needs students. In fact, much of our teacher quality agenda draws on what teachers and union leaders tell us needs to change to better support teachers and elevate the profession.

During the last year, I undertook a Listening and Learning Tour that took me to more than 30 states. During that tour, and in the seven preceding years when I was CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I had hundreds of conversations with talented teachers. Virtually every teacher I spoke to told me the same thing, expressing a conviction borne out repeatedly in teacher surveys: Teachers want to challenge the status quo and they want to be treated as skilled professionals.

Most teachers are not content with their pre-service preparation. Novice teachers and veterans alike say they were not adequately prepared for the realities of managing a classroom of diverse learners. Once in the classroom, teachers found they lacked consistent, high-quality mentoring from an experienced teacher.

Nor do teachers get enough time to collaborate and plan with their colleagues, discuss problem students, and learn from their peers. Professional development is generally of poor quality, and often fails to develop a teacher's skills. Drop-by evaluations by principals are superficial. Single-salary compensation policies offer few incentives to teachers to take on leadership responsibilities in their schools—and almost no encouragement to attract, reward, and recognize effective teachers in high-needs schools.

Today, union leaders committed to challenging the status quo are courageously and candidly speaking out about the need to move beyond their comfort zones. For example, AFT president Randi Weingarten is an outspoken critic of current teacher evaluation systems. "For too long and in too many places," she says, "teacher evaluation has ranged from hollow to harmful. For most teachers, the process of evaluation is a ritual in which a principal spends 15 minutes in their classroom once a year checking off a grocery list of minimum competencies. This process does not improve teaching [or] learning."

NEA president Dennis Van Roekel testified recently that "we can all agree that our public schools need a wholesale transformation." Dennis concluded that "if states and/or the federal government are to make a serious commitment to ensuring a quality teacher for every child … attention should be placed on how best to advance the professionalism of teaching."

So how does the administration plan to advance the teaching profession? As the President and I have stated, we start from the presumption that far-reaching reforms to the teaching profession can only take hold with the support and guidance of teachers and their unions. That is one reason why our teaching quality agenda adopts many of the policies that teachers themselves told us are essential to elevating the profession.

No area of the teaching profession is more plainly broken today than that of teacher evaluation and professional development. In district after district, more than 95 percent of teachers are rated as good or superior, even in schools that are chronically underperforming year after year. Worse yet, evaluations typically fail to take any account of a teacher's impact on student learning.

The truth is that students and teachers

don't live in mythic Lake Wobegon, where everyone is above average. Yet we have an evaluation system today that pretends otherwise. As a result, great teachers don't get recognized, don't get rewarded, and don't help their peers grow. The teachers in the middle of the skills spectrum don't get the support they need to improve. And the teachers at the bottom don't get the support they need either, and if they do and still don't improve, they need to be counseled out of the profession. It's not just students who suffer; as Al Shanker pointed out, "teachers have to live with the results of other people's bad teaching—the students who don't know anything." To continue tinkering around the edges of such a dysfunctional system is a waste.

All of the department's new or redesigned programs provide powerful incentives for states and districts to make far-reaching changes to teacher evaluation and professional development—from Race to the Top, to the 2009 School Improvement Grants, the Teacher Incentive Fund, and Title I and IDEA funds under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Our guiding principle is simply that teachers should be treated as professionals: They should have the support, tools, and opportunities to perform at their full potential by having timely and accurate data about their students to inform instruction; they should have time to consult and collaborate with their peers; and they should be evaluated, compensated, and advanced based in part on student learning.

Student growth and gain, not absolute test scores, are what we are most interested in—how much are students improving each year, and what are teachers, schools, school districts, and states doing the most to accelerate student achievement?

The $4.3 billion Race to the Top program recognizes that strong teachers and leaders are the heart of educational improvement, and it places more weight on this factor than any other in its grant competition. The final Race to the Top application emphasizes that professional collaboration and planning time, individualized professional development plans, training and support to use assessment data, classroom observations with timely and constructive feedback, and other activities are critical to developing high-quality evaluation systems and professional development.

The Race to the Top competition also recognizes that teacher effectiveness cannot be assessed solely on student test scores. Instead, teacher effectiveness should be evaluated based on multiple measures, provided that student academic growth over the course of the year is a significant factor. I am pleased that both Dennis Van Roekel and Randi Weingarten recognized and applauded a number of these elements in the final Race to the Top guidelines.

It defies common sense to bar all consideration of student learning from teacher evaluation. But it is time to move past the over-reliance on fill-in-the-bubble tests to richer assessments of successful teaching and learning—and the department will be pursuing such reforms in its $350 million competition for a new generation of assessments when it moves forward with reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2010. Those new assessments will be aligned to common college and career-ready standards being developed by states—which the NEA and AFT have endorsed, and which, eventually, should reduce curricular turmoil and instability for teachers.

Finally, teachers need high-quality, timely information about the progress of their students. Through the State Longitudinal Data Systems program and Race to the Top, we're providing hundreds of millions of dollars to states and districts to develop data systems that deliver this information in a timely and useful format. When teachers get better data on student growth, including results from interim assessments, they have the chance to tailor classroom instruction to the needs of their students and drive a cycle of continuous improvement.

Not all teachers have experience using data to improve instruction. But the department is asking states that apply for Race to the Top grants to develop plans for professional development to help teachers and principals get training in how to use data to inform instruction.

We want to continue working with teachers and unions to elevate the teaching profession. With that kind of collaboration, it is possible to turn battlegrounds into common ground. I am encouraged by the NEA's new $6 million initiative to recruit more topnotch teachers in high-needs schools and hard-to-staff subjects like science and mathematics, and specialties like special education and English language acquisition. I am heartened as well by the AFT's support of pay-for-performance initiatives in the AFT's Innovation Fund, and the AFT's innovative contract in New Haven, Connecticut.

As we move ahead to reform the teaching profession, we'll have disagreements and make mistakes along the way. But we cannot let the perfect become the enemy of the good. The need for reform, both for students and teachers, is urgent. Students cannot afford to wait another decade, while adults tinker with issues of teacher quality. It's time to stop tweaking the system. It's time, once and for all, to make teaching the revered profession it should be. ❐