

PS/IS 49 QUEENS
THE DOROTHY BONAWIT KOLE SCHOOL
63-60 80th Street
Middle Village, New York 11379
(718) 326-2111
FAX (718) 894-3026

Anthony Lombardi
Principal

Richard Hallenbeck
IA Assistant Principal

October 17, 2012

The topic of educational reform has been on the national agenda since the publication of the 1983 report Nation at Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Since that time, research has supported the unfortunate reality that education in the United States as compared to other industrialized nations has been on a steady decline. There are many factors that contribute to this national problem. The debate over school reform has divided the educational community, legislators and parents. Despite the ongoing dialogue, however, we have not made the substantive changes necessary to revamp schools across the country.

Since the early 1990's, I have been an active participant in school reform. It was at that time that it became evident to me that the existing work rules and legislation were not in the best interest of either improving schools or helping students. Although we have attempted to increase accountability and improve our information systems, there has not been enough effort or success in fundamentally changing school culture, antiquated work rules and the day to day operation of schools. There has been much talk about reform but not enough action in changing contractual language. Influence in politics unfortunately has marginalized the

bold action which would be necessary to raise the level of performance in many of our schools.

In a brief summary, I would like to present three critical areas that should be the topic of a more extensive conversation. The three items that I am addressing represent only a small glimpse of the problems that compromise establishing better schools.

Teacher Work Day

The information age and the global economy have impacted education in the United States in significant ways. By making the world a smaller place, companies have been able to compete on a world stage for the best qualified personnel. As a result, competition has become increasingly fierce. Our school systems across the country have not made the needed changes to make a first rate school system. If we are to succeed in our venture to compete with other nations, teachers, administrators and elected officials must revamp the educational agenda and better focus on what steps we will need to make real change.

One of the most dramatic changes as a result of a global economy is the way technology is now being employed in all levels of industry and commerce. As a nation, we are beginning to understand that we must also make the commensurate changes in the way we teach our youngsters. However, given the nature of the way we have structured school systems, these changes have been slow. Some of the changes have been only symbolic.

With the advent of Common Core Standards, school systems across the nation are being asked to raise their level of student performance. The demands are rippling through all areas of the curriculum. Subsequently, these changes are making new demands on classroom teachers. A dilemma is created. We promote a new set of demands across the country, but can we meet these

objectives within a work day for school personnel that we set in the early 20th century?

One of the basic problems in meeting new standards is imbedded in the fact that there has been little change in the length of the school day in the public schools. We operate as if the increased expectations and demands of students and teachers can be achieved within the same amount of time that we have always set aside for instruction.

The fact of the matter is that more time is required to meet our educational demands hence the teacher work day and work year must be lengthened. We cannot continue the obvious charade of mandating new goals and high expectations and yet maintain existing practices. We not only need more time with students, but we also need more time as educators to plan and prepare our efforts with curriculum. Maintaining an early 20th century model will not allow us to reach the ambitious set of learning objectives that are now being set for schools. The kind of professionalism now required of teachers will, by itself, require them to have more time on task not only with students but with one another to share and plan ways of meeting a much more stringent set of requirements.

The current New York City contract, as well as other labor contracts across the country must be seriously considered as an impediment to reaching and fulfilling new demands being made on a national educational platform. Other than the work that has begun in some charter schools, far too little unified thought or action is being given to this monumental task. Obviously, there will be resistance for the changes that are necessary, but if we are going to be serious about meeting the goals set by the Common Core Standards, we will have to reengineer our thinking about the professional work day.

Let's take a look at the existing work rules in New York City:

- The existing teacher work day is 6 hours and 50 minutes. In a school that has a 7 period day, 5 of those periods are spent with students, 1 period is scheduled for lunch and 1 is a prep period which could not be assigned or used for staff development.
- Unlike other municipal or State employees, principals are not allowed to assign teachers mandated overtime to either attend professional development or meetings with parents. Principals have absolutely no vehicle to extend the work day or provide professional development outside the scheduled work time.
- All teachers must be assigned between the hours of 8:00 and 3:45. The time framework leaves little room for flexibility.
- Teachers do not work in July and August. They basically share the same holidays as the students, therefore no professional development or support for at risk students can be scheduled during that time.
- Teachers report two days before the students and have one or two professional development days throughout the year hampering consistent professional interaction. Teachers end their work year the same day as the students.
- Professional development must be conducted at the expense of the students because substitutes need to be hired to cover the teachers during that time.
- The teacher's work day ends at the same time as the students' school day. Therefore, there is no time for extended planning, professional development, critique of lessons, etc.

Tenure and Termination Procedures

- Teacher unions have been able to protect poorly performing teachers through tenure protection. Teachers who have been rated unsatisfactory or incompetent over a number of years

have been allowed to return to the classroom because of an overly complicated termination system. The current practice to terminate a poorly performing teacher does not support effective practice or productivity in the classroom.

- The inability to rid the system of the most poorly performing teachers compromises the work of highly performing teachers. Furthermore, the inability to dismiss the poorest performers promotes a system of mediocrity. Teachers who should improve do not have any incentive to improve.
- Even if we create a system of metrics that identifies poorly performing teachers, contractual obligations and tenure laws do not allow us to terminate them in an expedient manner.
- Satisfactory vs. Good - There are many teachers who are not the poorest performers however they are not necessarily good teachers. The parameters that qualify a teacher as satisfactory is very broad. There are many teachers who simply come to work with poor lesson plans and no clear agenda to raise student achievement. Those teachers are often overlooked because of the amount of work needed to remove the poorest of performers.
- If we streamline the procedures and work rules, there will be much more money reinvested into the system to promote student growth.

Principal Training

- Principals and assistant principals are also in a union. Although the principal and assistant principal contract is much more streamlined than the teachers' contract, they, nonetheless, share the same interest to maintain the status quo with respect to reform. Teachers and principals at the bargaining table have mutual interest to protect poorly performing members and existing work rules.
- Principals often lack the training or support to take over complex failing organizations. When a principal takes the

helm of a poorly performing school, he/she is saddled with existing administrative staff and teachers. Therefore, although he/she may understand the changes that may be necessary, they lack the authority to change teachers or their administrative team.

- Principals and assistant principals are in the same union. If a principal inherits or deems it necessary to rate an assistant principal unsatisfactory, their own union must side with the assistant principal.
- There is a complete lack of training for the principals' position. School systems are complex organizations that require expertise in many different areas. Often principals are thrown into extremely difficult situations without the proper support or training. As a country, we have mainly focused on teacher training and professional development. There has been a complete lack of attention to training our leaders to meet the demands of the job. Often, an assistant principal takes over a position as principal. However, their own principal whom they served lacked the skills to properly train them.

In closing, much discussion has taken place and many individuals are well intentioned. However, in a labor intensive environment where contracts are lengthy, prescriptive and inflexible, the work that is needed for reform must be ironed out at the bargaining table. School systems across the country have limited authority because they are strapped by work rules that put teacher protection over student achievement. If contracts act as a blueprint for the administration of schools, then the policy makers need to seriously analyze their long range goals of promoting equality and competitiveness for our students.