

SOCIETY

Teachers' Unions Save the Day

THE SOURCE: "Why Teacher Unions Are Good for Teachers and the Public" by Diane Ravitch, in *American Educator*, Winter 2006–07.

School administrators are increasingly being required to function like corporate CEOs in a brutally competitive industry. Principals compete against one another for students and staff. Schools are taken over by mayors or governors, or threatened with permanent closure.

Educational systems, just like cities, states, and businesses in a free country, need checks and balances, writes Diane Ravitch, a former assistant secretary of education in the administration of George H. W. Bush. Though often maligned, teachers' unions are a key source of such countervailing power. Not only are they needed to protect teacher rights, but to sound the alarm against unwise policies and to advocate sound teaching methods, especially when administrators are noneducators.

"There's a common view among corporate-style reformers today that the way to fix low-performing schools is to install an autocratic principal who rules with an iron fist," Ravitch writes. Many new principals have been trained in quickie programs to think like corporate CEOs. Some have no classroom experience and lack the background to make wise decisions about

curriculum or to evaluate teachers.

In New York City, she writes, the mayor—Michael Bloomberg, a businessman—took over the schools in 2002 and appointed Joel I. Klein—a lawyer—as chancellor. They selected a new curriculum in reading and math, insisted that all teachers adopt the "workshop model" of teaching, and micromanaged teachers' compliance with tight, sometimes daily supervision. The jury is out on the overall results.

But teachers were affected immediately. They found themselves in trouble if they did not teach exactly as dictated, if they did not follow the format of minilessons, if their bulletin boards did not meet detailed specifications, or if their classroom furniture was not aligned precisely according to regulation, says Ravitch, now a professor of education at New York University.

Particularly in the current climate of school reform, unions provide an important means of protecting teachers against arbitrary and unwise decisions made by inexperienced principals, Ravitch writes. They need support in standing up to supervisors who insist that they teach in ways they believe are wrong. They should be glad they have a union that can represent them in cases of "oppressive supervision" over picayune issues.

The ABCs of good education are the same everywhere: a rigorous curriculum, effective instruction, adequate resources, willing students, and a cultural climate in which education is respected. Education works only in a collaborative atmosphere, with teachers, administrators, and elected officials all working toward the same goals, Ravitch writes. Unions are "important, vital, and needed so long as they speak on behalf of the rights and dignity of teachers and the essentials of good education."

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Death by City Life

THE SOURCE: "Cities and Their Consequences" by William H. McNeill, in *The American Interest*, March–April 2007.

GREATER MEXICO CITY, WITH a population of 11 million in 1975, now has 18 million people; São Paulo, Brazil, has ballooned from 9.6 to 17 million; Mumbai, India, has more than doubled, from 7 to 16 million. If University of Chicago historian William H. McNeill were painting a picture of today's world, it would feature a giant wave cresting as it rushes against the shore. The image, he writes, represents a new and largely overlooked demographic phenomenon: More than half of the world's population now lives in cities.

For more than five millennia, most people lived in villages and small cities that were "very hospitable to human reproduction." Through war and famine, villagers produced enough children to work