

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."

SOCIETY

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

their fields, and could also send a surplus of young people to the city or, more rarely, frontier lands. Children were needed. They helped perform simple chores from their earliest years, and later they took care of the elderly and sick. But when families migrated to the cities, there was no work for children, and somebody needed to watch them. Over the centuries, cities have been “demographic sinkholes,” McNeill says. In premodern times, urban immigrants found marginal jobs, and many soon died of infectious diseases, leaving few or no heirs. But even as sanitation and living conditions improved, the “sinkhole” description remained apt. Urban life makes child rearing costly and difficult, and the availability of birth control makes it a matter of choice.

Since 1920, McNeill writes, “most Americans of European descent have been urbanized, and, like everyone else in that circumstance, they are not reproducing themselves.” The great cities of Europe, Canada, Russia, Japan, and China, as well as urban pockets in Latin America and Africa, are similarly affected. Where urban popula-

The settlement of more than half of the world's population in cities threatens to increase disorder.

tion growth has flagged, cities have sustained themselves by attracting immigrants, many from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The settlement of more than half of humankind in cities not only results in a likely population decline, it also threatens to increase world disorder. In European cities and elsewhere, many recent immigrants have failed to be integrated into their new homes. They live in separate neighborhoods, poor and second class, and find themselves unable to grasp even the lowest rungs of the economic ladder. The tensions of cheek-by-jowl inequality provide fertile ground for extremism, both religious and secular. Although man is infinitely adaptable, McNeill writes, the big sociological question is whether man will “learn in time to make cities truly thrive.”

SOCIETY

Beyond the Black Caucus

THE SOURCE: “The New Black Realism” by Kay S. Hymowitz, in *City Journal*, Winter 2007.

EARLIER THIS YEAR, OPINION columnists were arguing over whether Barack Obama was “black enough” to win the African-American vote in the Democratic primaries for president. Had his white mother, his failure to grow up in the inner city, and his shortage of civil rights credentials disqualified him? Was his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention—“There’s not a black America and white America. . . . There’s the United States of America”—a naive effort to curry favor with whites? Then came the polls: Black respondents were moving out of the Hillary Clinton column and into the Obama camp in significant numbers. While it’s far too early to venture that Obama might transcend race in his campaign, it is timely to note that black

EXCERPT

The End of the Future

We stopped talking about the Future around the time that, with its microchips and its 24-hour news cycles, it arrived. Some days when you pick up the newspaper it seems to have been cowritten by J. G. Ballard, Isaac Asimov, and Philip K. Dick. Human sexual reproduction without male genetic material, digital viruses, identity

theft, robot firefighters and minesweepers, weather control, pharmaceutical mood engineering, rapid species extinction, U.S. presidents controlled by little boxes mounted between their shoulder blades, air-conditioned empires in the Arabian desert, transnational corporatocracy, reality television—some days it feels as if the imagined future of the mid-20th century was a kind of checklist, one from which we have been too busy ticking off items to bother with extending it.

—MICHAEL CHABON, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, in *Details*, Jan. 2006