

5 Biggest Lies About America's Public Schools

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Just weeks into the 2012-2013 school year education issues are already playing a starring role in the national conversation about America's future. Because it's an election year, the presidential candidates have been busy pretending there are many substantial distinctions between them on education policy (actually, the differences are arguably minimal). Meanwhile, the striking Chicago Teachers Union helped thrust teachers unions into the national spotlight, with union-buster Democrat Mayor Rahm Emanuel reminding us that, these days, Republicans and Democrats frequently converge on both education policy and labor-unfriendliness. Since pundits and politicians often engage in education rhetoric that obscures what's really going on, here are five corrections to some of the more egregious claims you may have recently heard.

Lie #1: Unions are undermining the quality of education in America.

Teachers unions have gotten a bad rap in recent years, but as education professor Paul Thomas of Furman University tells AlterNet, "The anti-union message...has no basis in evidence." In fact, Furman points out, "Union states tend to correlate with higher test scores." As a 2010 study conducted by Albert Shanker Fellow Matthew Di Carlo found, "[T]he states in which there are no teachers covered under binding agreements score lower [on standardized assessment tests] than the states that have them... If anything, it seems that the presence of teacher contracts in a state has a positive effect on achievement" - by as much as three to five points in reading and math at varying grade levels.

Even so, Thomas doesn't believe that high test-scores should be taken as the primary indication that union teachers are good for kids, noting that "union states tend to be less burdened by poverty while 'right-to-work' (non-union) states are disproportionately high-poverty" - and poverty, as we well know, has its own, profound impact on student performance.

For these reasons among others, union presence can never be isolated as the sole relevant factor in producing higher student achievement. But teachers unions are still important to student success. Why? Most importantly, perhaps, because they fight for equality of opportunity in education by, for example, opposing attempts to resegregate American schools. One of the reasons the CTU so resolutely opposed the school closures Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Board of Education threatened was because closures have proven to have disastrous consequences for displaced students in Chicago, who are generally forced to move from one underfunded, low-performing school to another. Teachers unions oppose such injustices because they support the rights of all children to have access to high-quality education -- not just the kids whose parents can afford high property taxes. That's a good thing for America's education system, not a bad one.

Lie #2: Your student's teacher has an easy and over-compensated job.

One talking point that circulated around the Chicago teachers' strike was that public school teachers are overpaid for easy jobs with plentiful time off. This is a longstanding gem that has little basis in fact. As political scientist Corey Robin of Brooklyn College/CUNY Graduate Center writes in the Washington Post, when he was growing up his affluent childhood community was embattled every year because the community so looked down on teachers. "Teachers had opted out of the capitalist game" in the minds of local parents and the assumption, according to Robin, was "there could be only one reason for that: they were losers."

But is teaching actually overcompensated? It's hard to imagine how. The New York Times points out that "The average primary-school teacher in the United States earns about 67 percent of the salary of an average college-educated worker in the United States." (And given the student debt bubble currently crippling so many young people, this is and will remain an area of real concern for recruiting future teachers.) And notably, the Times points out, the ratio of teacher pay to that of other college graduates is wider in the U.S. than in most other developed countries.

Let's not forget, too, the very long work hours that define most teaching jobs. Former high school English teacher Carrie Rogers tells AlterNet that most of the young teachers she's known in North Carolina "leave the profession after their second child" because of the extensive demands on their time. She says the "amount of time and effort it takes to teach effectively is [no longer possible] by the time they have two

kids." A "teacher's salary...minus two daycare bills for the total amount of time [teachers] spend at work doesn't work." In many states, teacher pay falls into a lower-middle income bracket, and Rogers says teachers "never work 40 hour weeks. They spend nights grading; Saturdays and evenings at grad school and continuing [education] programs; and lunch hours monitoring cafeterias."

Overcompensated? By whose standards?

Lie #3: If your child doesn't get picked in a charter school lottery, he or she is doomed.

The popular film *Waiting for Superman* characterizes charter schools as a silver bullet perfectly positioned to save public education -- if only they could replace traditional public schools as quickly as possible. The film picks up on the consequences of social inequality, but goes a step further, presuming that traditional public schools cannot be redeemed, and charters are the last hope for education.

Yet as it turns out, there's no proof that charter schools are intrinsically better than traditional public schools. A 2009 Stanford study found that charter school students generally perform no better than students attending traditional public schools. In fact, the study found, "academic growth in 37 percent of charter schools is significantly worse than traditional public schools. In addition, 46 percent of charter schools have the same academic results as traditional public schools. The six states with the largest number of charter schools - Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas - fared most poorly in the study."

But in spite of the evidence to the contrary, the public is often told that charter schools are indeed a better option than traditional public schools. That's what has caused so much trouble in the affluent Silicon Valley school district where Eric Lundberg's children are enrolled. Lundberg tells *AlterNet*, "The local school district is one of the best in the state...The district is committed to giving our students the best education possible and is supported by an amazing community."

But Lundberg says the transformation of a public school into a charter school has caused major upheaval in the community. The charter school is currently demanding the closure of an excellent traditional school so it can take over the school building, but traditional school proponents are fighting back with some strong arguments on their side. First of all, Lundberg notes, the charter school doesn't serve its "share of special needs or low income students" (privately run charter schools can - and frequently do - turn students away whom they fear may lower their standardized test scores, including students with disabilities). In addition, "They have an unelected board that is not accountable to anyone," and "the board made what appears to be an illegal personal loan (\$250,000) to the principal/superintendent."

This isn't just a problem in Silicon Valley; mismanagement and exclusionary policies have characterized the proliferation of charter schools throughout the U.S. Combine those facts with their dubious record of academic achievement and it's clear charters just aren't all they're cracked up to be.

Lie #4: Your child will automatically be better off if your school district adopts a "school choice" assignment plan.

One way charters often take root in communities is that they're introduced through "school choice" plans that purport to give parents a measure of autonomy in choosing their child's school. In some cases, this means parents are offered vouchers that can be used to transfer public school dollars to private (often religiously affiliated) schools; in other cases, parents are asked to select two or three of their top school choices, and will be assigned to one of them. The fact that poor parents working multiple jobs might not have the capacity to fully research their options is never discussed.

If this weren't problematic enough, "choice" can cause other headaches for parents. In Wake County, NC, parents have widely expressed outrage about the effects of their temporarily instituted school choice plan. Promoted as "convenient" for families, in practice the plan has resulted in widespread transportation problems that have left students stranded at schools well into the evening hours. And in Harlem last month, parents complained to *The New York Times* that they were not given any "high-performing" school options to choose from in their much-touted school choice plan.

School choice tends to resonate with parents, but as Thomas tells *AlterNet*, "The evidence on choice shows [that]...parents do a terrible job with that choice." This is in part because though market-based

solutions like "choice" sound good on paper, they are rarely any match for the complex needs of our nation's schools and the children they educate. And as Thomas has previously noted, both pro- and anti-school choice think-tanks and researchers are now finding that choice yields no academic gains. This has happened both at the local level (a conservative think tank called the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute reported that it was "disappointed" to admit that school choice had failed in Milwaukee) and at the national level, as well. To prove this latter point, Thomas cites a voucher-specific 2008 study, the most comprehensive look at school choice done yet, which argues that,

"... what little evidence exists about the likely impact of a large-scale voucher program on the students who remain in the public schools is at best mixed... [and the] evidence to date from other forms of school choice is not much more promising. As such,...one should not anticipate large academic gains from this seemingly inexpensive reform."

The short of it? There is just no conclusive evidence that school choice programs actually work. Don't get caught up in the hype.

Lie #5: Your student's teacher sees your constructive involvement in your child's education as an annoyance.

A narrative that pits parents and teachers against each other is part and parcel of the politicized rhetoric about education that you hear in the news. Educators have known for some time that parental involvement is a key component of student success. Indiana University's Career and Postsecondary advancement center reports that, "66 different studies came to one conclusion based on the evidence: families matter. Whether changing TV viewing habits, providing diverse readings materials around the house or volunteering at school, parents can help their children succeed as students." But corporate reformers are actively promoting antagonistic relationships between parents and schools.

The Center for Public Education cites a 2008 study by the National Center for Education Statistics which found that parental involvement is one of the top predictors - if not the top predictor - of academic success. But common anti-teacher rhetoric has created some unproductive relationships between parents and teachers. Public school teacher Madeleine Bolden of the Atlanta area tells AlterNet that she's noticed "parents becoming more adversarial with...teachers." More than ever before, she says, "I have felt bashed by parents who mask either their children's failings or their own failings by the rhetoric" of school failure. Often, she says, parents approach teachers as if "we are doing everything wrong."

She concludes, "This kind of attitude erodes teacher student relationships in the classroom. When parents consistently put down the teacher," it's not easy for teachers and parents to "bond in a way that promotes optimal learning. Students are suffering as a result."

Whatever else you may have heard, the truth is, most teachers do welcome constructive parent involvement -- especially involvement that doesn't put them on the defensive from the outset. The Center for Public Education cites a 2003 study: "Two-thirds of teachers surveyed (Public Agenda, 2003) believed that their students would perform better in school if their parents were more involved in their child's education." And the center notes further that "virtually all schools welcome parent involvement," from attendance at teacher conferences to PTA membership to parental help with homework.

As with much of the other disinformation being spread about public education, the key here is to do your homework: Check in with your child's teacher before there is a problem, and check the assumptions that he or she doesn't want you there at the door. Most teachers will be glad to find that you're an active, willing partner in your child's education.