Column: Chicago teachers lose unless they revise strategy

By Jack Schneider

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For the past three days, 30,000 educators have been on the streets of Chicago marching, chanting, and carrying signs. They are determined. And they are united. But they have the wrong message and, as such, they are on the verge of permanently alienating the American public.

Striking educators have a host of concerns, but first among them is the issue of so-called value-added measures of teacher quality. District leaders in Chicago, like policymakers in dozens of other cities, are pushing for a system in which student standardized test scores would be used to calculate the learning gains attributable to particular teachers. The central benefit of these value-added schemes—at least in the eyes of school reformers—is that they are ostensibly more objective than current observation-based evaluations, in which the overwhelming majority of teachers receive the highest ratings. Consequently, reformers argue, they promise to make it possible to reward good teachers, weed out ineffective ones, and channel support to those who need it. The idea has broad support on both sides of the political aisle, and according to the most recent Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, 63 percent of Americans believe that such measures should constitute at least a third of teacher evaluations.

So why are teachers against it? Many more thoughtful educators point to the fact that value-added models tend to produce inconsistent results. One recent study of Palm Beach, Florida, for instance, found that over 40 percent of teachers scoring in the bottom decile one year somehow scored in the top two deciles the following year—clear evidence of an unreliable model. And in a 2010 study by Mathematica Policy Research, investigators found that the error rate for comparing teacher performance was an alarming 35 percent. Such figures should give policymakers pause.

Yet the message on the picket line isn't about the potential flaws of these models; it's about job security. As one teacher told Reuters: "it's about working conditions." And as thousands of pickets remind the public, teachers are "on strike for a fair contract."

That, however, is a losing argument. Support for public school teachers generally remains strong, with three in four Americans expressing trust and confidence in them. But according to a 2010 Time magazine poll, two-thirds of Americans oppose the idea of teacher tenure. A 2011 Quinnipiac University poll found that 90 percent of public school parents surveyed believed that performance, rather than seniority, should be the basis of teacher layoffs. And a 2011 Gallup poll found that 47 percent of Americans believe that unionization has hurt the quality of public school education—a figure up 9 percent since 1976. In short, teachers will be hard-pressed to rally public sympathy for a fairer contract, especially in the midst of a recession.

Even if teachers were to change tack and talk about the potential flaws in value-added models, they would still fail to generate real sympathy, at least in this case. District leaders in Chicago have proposed both a 16 percent pay increase and a relatively benign rollout of the value-added model. Over the course of five years, the weight of such measures will slowly climb until they account for 25 percent of evaluations for elementary school teachers and 40 percent for high school teachers—figures roughly in line with what the public thinks they should be. Further, reformers have spent the last decade staking out the rhetorical high ground on this issue, making the case that teacher opposition to reform is motivated by inflexible self-interest. Adult needs, they argue, need to finally take a back seat to the needs of children. This shouldn't be about contracts; it should be about kids.

If teachers want to turn the tides back in their favor, they need to begin making a case about children and learning rather than about adults and working conditions. And there is a bold case that might be made.

For the past decade, school administrators have pressured teachers to prepare students for the high stakes standardized tests mandated by No Child Left Behind. And as a result, the curriculum has narrowed dramatically, with cuts to science, language, art, history, and music. Meanwhile, teachers have resorted to drilling their students in preparation for machine-scored multiple choice exams. No one wants schools to look like this. Not the American public, which has expressed high levels of dissatisfaction with NCLB. Not students, for whom learning is stripped of both its joy and its relevance. And not even school reformer-in-chief Arne Duncan, who recently observed that tests too frequently fail to assess "important knowledge and skills."

Our standardized tests, in short, are out of sync with our values. Designed for cost-effectiveness and scoring efficiency, they emphasize strategic guesswork and the memorization of minutia, while ignoring more important factors like performance and habits of mind. As long as that's the case, any policy that incentivizes educators to teach to the test is a reckless proposition. And that's just what the current value-added push does—it essentially tells teachers to raise test scores at any cost.

If the Chicago Teachers Union wants to score a victory for their membership, as well as for teachers across the nation, they will ditch their current talking points and make one simple demand: get rid of the bad tests. In the short term, it may slow the momentum of the movement to overhaul teacher evaluation, which is predicated on a misguided faith in standardized tests. And in the long term, it may help teachers recover the moral and pedagogical high ground in a policy war that they are otherwise bound to lose.

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