

A Standing Ovation for More of the Same Harder in OKC

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On August 19, Oklahoma City's new superintendent, Robert Neu, got a standing ovation for promising to spend a lot of money to buy gadgets and hire better teachers to squeeze improved performance from virtually [insurmountably challenging teaching circumstances](#). His "[bold plans](#)" are bold only in the sense that he expects success with policies that have already repeatedly failed (Rick Hess' "[same things over and over](#)") to deliver noteworthy academic improvement. While I want to applaud Superintendent Neu's determination and good attitude, my core reaction is serious consternation and dis-belief. I'm not sure whether to be more concerned with Superintendent Neu's plan to spend big bucks on 'More-of-the-Same-Harder', or the standing ovation from his audience. I'm not sure which is worse, Mr. Neu seeking the expectation of improvement from a gullible audience without expecting it himself, or expecting it to work despite the extensive evidence that it does not. By the way, I regard Mr. Neu's plan to hire better teachers as different from the much-needed dismissal of dysfunctional teachers. It is one thing to fail to secure much improvement from putting more skilled, more determined teachers in difficult circumstances. It is quite another to hold back everyone assigned to classrooms staffed by burned out or unqualified teachers. The latter case is a frequent result of [epidemic out-of-field teaching](#) ("69% of 5th to 8th graders are being taught math by teachers without a mathematics degree or certificate, and 93 percent of those same students are being taught physical sciences by teachers with no physical science degree or certificate"); a key [root of the problem](#) that arises from the single salary schedule (price control that ignores market differences for different teaching skills). A teacher may be unqualified (or uninterested – not passionate) to teach the subject of a classroom they are assigned to, but qualified and passionate for other subjects and pedagogies.

In closing, let me explain the rational basis of general audience and even educator gullibility. In a school system based on sound assumptions and facts about student learning and the multi-dimensional nature of student and educator abilities and engaging interests, hiring better teachers should produce improved schooling. But we have a school system that federal, state, and local political processes have grounded on implicit [heroic assumptions](#). Because the key elements of the current school system are notoriously resistant to substantive change, sincere efforts to improve outcomes are repeatedly channeled into things that sound good (improved inputs like teacher skill and better tools, higher standards, and improved accountability), and there is denial or failure to discover or confess the dismal track record of ‘sounds good’ policies. So, the [Roots of the Problem](#) mostly survive [Superintendents](#), Governors, and Secretaries of Education determined to wring improved performance from the current system. They secure applause by proposing things that seem like they should produce a lot of improvement, but produce little, if any, improvement. Superintendent turnover is high, in part, because reality quickly sets in, and they must move on. Moving on mostly means another school board hires them in the hopes that the new person has the [magic to do what his/her predecessor could not](#); improve the school system without changing it; satisfy a diverse parent/student clientele with a one-size-fits-all comprehensively uniform product.