

Teacher Effectiveness: President Obama is Among the Intellectual Prisoners of the Status Quo

John Merrifield
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This [Wall Street Journal article](#) describing an Obama Administration effort to improve teacher effectiveness is proof that misinformed thinking persists at the highest levels. Teacher effectiveness is still very widely seen as [one-dimensional](#) including, apparently, by President Obama and his advisors. Teachers are mostly seen, mistakenly, as good, bad, or average. But, in fact, like the vast majority of humans, the vast majority of teachers have strengths and weaknesses. They are capable of being good at some kinds of instruction for some types of students, and mediocre or poor in other circumstances. President Obama seems unaware that unnecessarily challenging circumstances are a large part of the ineffectiveness problem. He sees effectiveness as a training problem. Taking for granted the permanence of the [very problematic public school teaching circumstances](#) is what intellectual prisoner of the status quo means.

Because the current system aims for uniformly comprehensive schools – the same menu for everyone on a giant campus – teachers that could specialize in an instructional approach that exploits one of their strengths then seem utterly ineffective when pushed to specialize in an area of weakness. Ineffectiveness is likely exacerbated by the current system's typical failure to reward excellence or tangibly punish failure, and a related high rate of teacher burnout. By trying to be everything to everyone, the current system makes the vast majority of educators appear to be average. Incredibly and fortunately, even though one size cannot fit all, there appear to be a relatively few individuals that are sufficiently gifted as communicators and lesson designers that they can be reasonably effective even in the unnecessarily, incredibly challenging circumstances of the typical public school classroom. Sadly, there has been [no evidence](#) that we

can train ungifted people to succeed in the typical trying public school classroom circumstances that maximize learning issue diversity by sorting children only by age and neighborhood, not [by ability, by subject](#).

Actually, teacher union (NEA) President Dennis Van Roekel is quoted in the [Wall Street Journal](#) article as noting that improved training is not enough, and that “better school conditions” are needed. At that high level of generality, at least, Mr. Van Roekel is correct. I’m certain Mr. Van Roekel and I don’t agree on what that general diagnosis means. The single salary schedule strongly supported by the teacher unions is a major reason for [‘out-of-field’ teaching](#); a price control that seriously undermines teaching effectiveness. And the teacher unions vigorously oppose even weak forms of school choice. Stronger versions are needed to achieve the [ability grouping by subject](#) in a way that would greatly improve teaching circumstances. Improved training, short of additional subject credentials for existing teachers, would not address the ‘out-of-field’ teaching problem or failure to ability group, by subject, nor would more and better training address the weak incentives problem that is among the [roots of the problem](#) of persistent, widespread public school classroom ineffectiveness.

President Obama also noted that, "Of particular concern is the fact that typically the least experienced teachers...often end up in the poorest schools;" something else readily addressed by eliminating the single salary schedule (a price control). The especially difficult circumstances of the schools in high poverty areas reduces the supply of teachers there. Higher salaries for teachers in harder-to-staff areas, and for harder to fill disciplines like math and science, are the answer prohibited by the single salary schedule that allows for differences only on the basis of time served and additional formal credentials. Because of high rates of teacher burnout, degree mills, and failure to differentiate which types of additional genuine credentials are useful in

particular circumstances (via the price signal of higher pay only for individuals with the specific needed skills), experience and additional credentials have not been shown to be determinants of improved effectiveness.