



## Education

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# Tempers may flare as worst-performing schools named

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Starting a few weeks ago, per orders from the U.S. Department of Education, each state began naming its worst schools. So the nationally famous blowup in Central Falls, where the superintendent fired the high school's entire staff, was only the first of what could be as many as 5,000 blowups.

Last December Arne Duncan, President Obama's secretary of education, told states to identify and then intervene aggressively in the worst 5 percent of their schools K-12 or the worst 5 schools, if that number is higher.

According to the administration's fact sheet, the reason for this drastic action includes the loss every school day of about 7,000 students who drop out, 1.2 million students each year. The U.S. has only about a 70 percent graduation rate, and "approximately 2,000 of America's high schools produce half of the nation's school dropouts."

Hopefully, by targeting the worst of the worst, we'll finally get serious about saving the kids who languish therein.

Unions, districts and communities can either welcome the challenge with bold, pro-student action or hunker down into protectionism. Duncan's mandate left them little middle ground.

Inevitably, fingers will point accusingly at labor, at management, and most unkindly, at the kids and their families. But the time for blame is past. Kids' lives are being ruined. The feds are right: 5,000 horrible schools should be closed, reconstituted, redesigned or handed over to a charter-management company.

The Bush-era No Child Left Behind law seemed truly draconian when it passed in 2001. But it didn't work. It relied on naming and shaming schools "in need of improvement," but had no real teeth to demand substantive improvements.

However, NCLB did force educators to build massive data systems to collect solid information on school performance. Data revealed that kids with special needs, poor kids and English language learners were being

sorely neglected. And NCLB inspired certain charter schools, magnets and creative school districts to do really outstanding work. But these schools flourished in tiny pockets, here and there. Not broadly. Since NCLB's implementation, the National Assessment of Education Progress, the "nation's report card," has shown only minor improvement in certain grades. The nation's pathetic graduation rate didn't budge. If anything, NCLB made the need for aggressive action more obvious.

So Duncan told states to develop a process for identifying their worst. Rhode Island officials used a point system to search for "Persistently Lowest-Achieving Schools" on the state department of education's Web site, a system also used by Massachusetts and Colorado.

Mind you, "the worst" only includes Title I schools, poor kids' schools where more than 40 percent of the students qualify for federally subsidized lunches. Rhode Island has 58 Title I-eligible schools, so it needed only to identify 5 schools. When two elementary schools tied for 5th, rather than create a whole new process, the state included them both for a total of 6.

Turmoil recently broke out in Massachusetts when it released the names of the state's 35 worst schools. This source of rancor and upset will spread nationally.

Rhode Island was first to erupt, because of its much-hated law requiring districts to lay off by March 1 all teachers who MIGHT need to be actually laid off in the summer when budgets and enrollments are known. Advocates for the law claim teachers need the time for job searches. But it means that every year, showers of pink slips rain down on schools, causing schoolwide clinical depression, even though usually most teachers are hired back.

Deborah Gist, Rhode Island's new commissioner of education, called the law "incredibly odd."

Now the whole nation will experience how upsetting layoffs or threats of radical change are to school communities when posed long before the school year ends.

Even so, I stand firmly for the fed's demands. But there's no pretending that we aren't demoralizing 5,000 schools in the process, depressing both teaching and learning. This work is very painful. But necessary.

As we struggle through, let's remember that all schools have some truly terrific teachers who are getting caught in the crossfire. Like good people in a corrupt company or police department, they will get painted with the same brush as the teachers who do need to be weeded out of the system. I wish there were some way to reach them individually and say, "You are wonderful. Surely you will sail through any good evaluation. You have my support."

Because we all need to imagine what it is like to be a good teacher in one of these underperforming schools, trying to help some of the most difficult kids in the state, when your whole school is being publicly condemned.

But it is time for the adults to come second. The kids must be first. However rude, ill-parented, or academically limited, all kids stuck in bad schools deserve better. And we the public need schools to teach those very kids to be much more successful so they stay off the welfare roles, out of prison and take good care of themselves.

Radically remaking 5,000 schools could be a real watershed for American education. It's needed. But this spring will be emotionally expensive. Change is definitely coming. So everyone needs to help the situation by trying very hard to be compassionate and kind.

Because times are getting harder than ever in 5,000 troubled schools.

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