

The New Normal in K-12 Education



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In the final days of 2015, Congress ushered in a new era of federal education law, updating *No Child Left Behind* to reflect both the big lessons we've learned over the past 15 years in education policy and the major changes that have taken place on the ground in our nation's schools since the 1990s. Yet if you listen to the rhetoric of many on the front lines of our education wars, you could be forgiven for thinking that *Reality Bites* has just premiered, Crystal Pepsi is all the rage, and the Spice Girls are the hottest ticket in town. Though a slow-moving Congress has realized that we live in a new education world, too many who spend their days fighting in the trenches have not.

When the reform movement sprung up two decades ago to bring forward new innovations like the expansion of school choice options through charter schools, a renewed focus on measuring teacher performance using robust evaluations, and expedited entryways into the teaching profession through programs like Teach For America, it did so to both increase data

and accountability and shake up what many felt was a stagnation of our K-12 education

and accountability and shake up what many felt was a stagnation of our K-12 education system. Such rapid change led to harsh accusations that reformers sought to “corporatize” and de-personalize our nation’s schools, leading to a near-blind rebuttal of change that continues to this day. But the truth is that while debates about questions like whether charter schools should exist may have been relevant in the 1990s, they now serve only to fill an existential need for activists on both sides to feel they have a moral high ground. Far too much energy continues to be expended on these outdated debates that simply have no place in the K-12 education system that exists in 2016.

This stagnation in conversation not only threatens our ability to move forward with the best policies for our nation’s students, but it also has had the unintended consequence of distracting leading thinkers—particularly in the Democratic Party—from participating in the real conversations that will shape our schools over the next decade or more. This can mean leaving progressive values unrepresented in some of the most important discussions about how we can expand educational opportunities for years to come. In order to have real influence on the education debate, Democrats must turn the page on these old battles, recognize the new reality, and advocate for progressive values within the context of this drastically altered landscape.

The New Normal

Warriors on both sides of the most divisive education fights continue to ignore a new set of facts on the ground. An evolution of policies and practices have radically shifted the context, but their conversations haven’t caught up. Like right-wing forces who continue to fight a Pyrrhic battle against Common Core despite the fact that nearly every state is already using those standards or has replaced them with ones that are mirror images in all but name, some on the left have fixated on fights that they have already lost. By doing so, they risk making themselves irrelevant in the most pressing debates of 2016—and self-described “reformers” who focus solely on pushing back against these outdated arguments risk the same fate.

New Normal #1: Charter Schools

The old fight: *Should charter schools exist?*

The new normal: In 1999, only 0.7% of American students were educated in charter schools. By 2014, that share had grown by more than eight times to 5.8%. Today, charter schools are educating students in 42 states, with 6,700 charter schools already serving close to three million students.¹ And this number is projected to continue to rise exponentially over the next two decades, with Bellwether Education Partners projecting that “charter schools are expected to educate 20% to 40% of all U.S. public school students by 2035.”² On top of the nationwide growth of charters, there are 14 school districts that already use charter schools to

educate 20% or more of their students, including Grand Rapids, MI (21%), Washington, DC

educate 50% or more of their students, including Grand Rapids, MI (51%), Washington, DC (44%), and New Orleans, LA (93%).³ This rapid expansion in the presence of charters also accompanies a marked shift in the public's view of these schools. Just this past year, PDK/Gallup's "Annual Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools" found that 70% of Americans favor the idea of charter schools, up from only 44% a decade earlier.⁴

It is clear from these numbers that charter schools are not going to disappear anytime soon—so we should stop wasting time having a fight about whether they should exist. Continuing to focus on whether or not we should have charter schools at all misses opportunities to instead weigh in on a number of other debates that could help make sure charter schools are best meeting the needs of the students they serve. If they do not engage in these new conversations, Democrats will send a message that they are agnostic to what charter schools look like or what happens to the students who attend them. That would be a mistake, as all charters are not created equal.

The new debates: *How can we make sure charter schools are best serving students?*

- **Should charter schools be racially and socioeconomically integrated?** Research shows that integrated schools are more likely to achieve positive benefits for students both academically and socially.⁵ Yet today, charter schools tend to have higher rates of poverty and racial isolation than their traditional counterparts.⁶ In Washington, DC, for example, more than three-quarters of the city's charters serve only minority students.⁷ Many of these schools are improving outcomes for their students, but the newness of the charter sector and the evolution of its admissions policies opens a window to experiment with integration strategies in a way that is less feasible in the traditional district setting. Yet many local, state, and federal policies currently make it difficult or impossible to take into account racial makeup in charter admission systems. With charters' ability to enroll students through weighted lotteries or other systems not completely dependent on zip code—such as pushing districts to create universal application systems that give parents the ability to apply for any district or charter school within a city—they are the perfect mechanism for policymakers to discuss whether or how student selection policies should be used to increase socioeconomic and racial integration in our schools. And engaging in this conversation also allows progressives and Democrats to address concerns about who—and how—students are selected to attend charter schools in the first place.

• **Should charter schools be unionized?** Perhaps one of the most obvious reasons why

- Should charter schools be unionized:** Perhaps one of the most obvious reasons why teachers' unions have been hostile to the charter school movement is that most charters are not unionized. Yet large charter management organizations (CMO), like Green Dot Public Schools in California, have shown that charter schools and unions do not have to be mutually exclusive. In fact, by 2009-10, 12% of charter schools were already unionized.⁸ It is clear that charter networks can work with national teachers' union affiliates to negotiate contracts that maintain important points of autonomy but also protect the due process rights of teachers.⁹ While unionization may not be the right fit for all charter schools, progressives could stop fighting charters as a proxy for de-unionization and more directly take on the fight to unionize successful charter schools, helping teachers at those schools to integrate collective bargaining practices into charters on their own terms.
- Should charter schools be for- or non-profit?** Current policies allow charter schools to operate under a variety of management structures. Today, 67% of all charter schools operate as non-profit independent schools, another 20% are run by non-profit organizations that operate more than one school (such as a CMO), and 13% are run by for-profit companies.¹⁰ But this breakdown can vary wildly from state to state, with for-profit charters making up nearly 80% of the total share in Michigan, and less than 1% in California.¹¹ Little research exists to understand how such management styles affect student achievement, and though for-profit schools have become a favored villain in higher education, there are few limits on for-profit charters providing K-12 education to communities with high numbers of low-income students. Some states, including New York, Mississippi, Washington, Tennessee, New Mexico, and Rhode Island, have all banned the operation of for-profit charters, however the expansion of online schooling has opened a new avenue for these schools to reach a larger proportion of kids.¹² And with new research indicating that online charter schools can actually cause students to lose an entire year's worth of instruction in math and nearly a half a year's worth of instruction in reading as compared to their brick-and-mortar peers, this is an area where additional scrutiny and oversight is needed.¹³ Engaging in a discussion about the best kind of charter management structure would allow Democrats to distinguish between charter schools that are serving students well and those that aren't—and even potentially head off the kind of problems we see in the for-profit higher education sector.

New Normal #2: Teacher Evaluations

The old fight: *Should teacher evaluations be linked to student test scores?*

The new normal: One of the hottest battlegrounds over the last decade has surrounded a fairly innocuous question: are teachers responsible for whether their students learn, and if so, how can we measure that outcome? States and districts have spent the last decade developing and

implementing new teacher evaluation systems that take into account multiple measurements

implementing new teacher evaluation systems that take into account multiple measurements, like observations from colleagues and principals, student and parent feedback, and student test score data from annual statewide or district tests, to ensure their teachers are serving their students. In fact, 42 states and the District of Columbia have policies in place today requiring student growth and achievement to be considered in teachers' evaluations—a practice essentially non-existent in most states prior to President Obama's Race to the Top competition in 2009. And according to the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), 35 of those states and DC require that student achievement data must be “a significant or the most significant factor in teacher evaluations.”¹⁴

States spent a good part of the last decade working to develop these new evaluation systems and provide parents and communities a more comprehensive approach to rating teacher performance other than “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory,” and there is little chance that most will spend the next ten years dismantling these laws. This is particularly true given that most states have already spent a significant amount of time training teachers and principals on how to fully implement these systems. With this changed landscape, the question really is no longer whether or not we should use test score data as one of multiple factors to track teacher performance, but how to do so in a way that is as comprehensive and fair as possible. Those who argue we should return to a “pass/fail” system will meet strong resistance from the civil rights community and other powerful political forces—including concerned parents. And if progressives focus only on trying to tear down these systems, they will have little chance to weigh in on how we should improve them to better serve both students and teachers.

The new debates: *How can we best use data to support teachers and provide all students with effective teachers?*

- Are teacher evaluations fair and inclusive? Even with all of the advancements states have

- **ARE TEACHER EVALUATIONS FAIR AND INCLUSIVE?** EVEN WITH ALL OF THE ADVANCEMENTS STATES HAVE made to create better assessment systems over the last decade, more than half of teachers still teach in non-tested grades and subjects.¹⁵ This lack of data makes it difficult for states to fairly measure student achievement for all teachers, although some districts have attempted to remedy this problem by using school-wide scores or student portfolios as a replacement for tests.¹⁶ Even where there are no problems getting the data, states must also determine how much that data should count toward a teacher's overall evaluation score. The Gates Foundation's MET Project determined that the sweet spot for this component is between 33-50% in tested subjects to ensure that test scores become neither too narrow nor broad a focus in evaluating a teacher's overall performance.¹⁷ With nearly one-third of states already putting student growth measures at the 50% mark, and some like Nevada saying that student data must count "at least 50%," there is significant room for policymakers to focus their energy on finding a balance that works fairly for teachers across subjects and grade spans.¹⁸ But that balance will only be achieved if policymakers focus on mending, not ending, teacher evaluation systems.

- **Are there ways to give teachers more agency in evaluations?** Another area ripe for discussion is how we can provide teachers with greater say over customizing their evaluations to work best for them. For example, some teachers who start with students below grade-level and make significant gains with them throughout the year may be better served by including measures of growth—rather than grade-level proficiency. By contrast, teachers who already have high-performing students may be better served by being measured by proficiency data on nationally-normed tests in their evaluations, since growth may be difficult to prove for those at the very high end of the spectrum. Rather than make it a one-size-fits-all proposition, states could allow teachers to simply choose which score—either raw (with a high proficiency bar) or value-added—to include as the student data component in their evaluations. Schools and districts could also look more closely into using test score data as a way to "screen" or "flag" teachers who need additional supports, an idea first explored by Doug Harris out of Tulane University.¹⁹ These and other ideas like them could significantly improve evaluations from the teacher perspective, but few players in the political debate around evaluations have the energy to innovate in this area while they are distracted by outdated arguments about whether we should have ever put evaluations into place.

- **Do evaluations trigger professional development?** How we evaluate teachers is important

- **DO EVALUATIONS TRIGGER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** HOW WE EVALUATE TEACHERS IS IMPORTANT, but equally important is what we do once they have been evaluated. Progressives should put greater emphasis on ensuring that districts and schools link evaluations back to personalized support and development for teachers at all stages in their careers. By spending so much time focused on arguing about whether we should have evaluations (again, a question on which a decision has already been made in nearly every state), Democrats are missing an opportunity to agitate for the support and career development most teachers want and deserve.

New Normal #3: Testing

The old fight: *Should we require students to take standardized tests?*

The new normal: No issue in education has gotten more attention over the last few years than the issue of testing. Parents, teachers, and students have argued that the era of annual testing ushered in under the passage of NCLB has created a culture where the joy of learning has been replaced by an incessant stream of fill-in-the-bubble tests. Yet, even with the anti-testing frenzy reaching a fever pitch this past year, lawmakers have spoken loudly: annual testing is here to stay. In the latest rewrite of the NCLB law, both the House and Senate maintained annual testing in their respective chambers, and they did so for a very good reason. Evidence has demonstrated that the use of annual testing has played a positive role in uncovering achievement gaps between low-income, special education, and minority students and their more advantaged peers.²⁰ A failure to continue this process would make it easy for states to systematically ignore those students, allowing them to once again fall through the cracks.

Studies have also found that it is states and districts that have been responsible for layering on unnecessary and duplicative tests each year, not the 17 federally-mandated assessments a child must take throughout the course of his or her K-12 career. In fact, students spend on average less than 2% of instructional time each year taking standardized assessments—not quite the kill-and-drill environment many anti-testing activists would have you believe.²¹ The new federal education law update, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), encourages states to make sure students are only engaging in meaningful assessment practice by providing them funding to audit their testing systems top to bottom. This opportunity also comes at a time when we have seen major advancements in the design of tests, including those that are now capable of assessing higher-level thinking skills and pinpointing exactly what students do and do not know. The question itself is no longer “to test or not to test,” but rather how can the tests we do use uncover information in a way that allows us to tailor support for our students.

The new debates: *How can we make sure that the tests we have are strong measures of student learning, especially for high need students?*

- **How can we use technology to create better and timelier tests?** If the last decade of

- **How can we use technology to create better and timelier tests?** In the last decade or so, technological advancements have taught us anything, it's that testing does not have to be one-size-fits-all. The integration of new computer-adaptive and interactive tests allows parents, teachers, and schools to know exactly where every student is, as opposed to a system of "proficient" or "not proficient" as was the case with many of the paper-and-pencil tests used in the past. In fact, the menu of testing options available to districts today proves that the assessments students are taking are not your mother's standardized tests. For example, tests today now allow students to highlight text in reading passages to demonstrate areas of importance, write out multi-step math problems to demonstrate their logic on how they arrived at an answer, and can adapt to give students easier or harder questions in order to pinpoint their exact grade level.²² Expanding access to these types of new innovative assessments provides districts and states with better data that allows them to target resources directly to the students who need them most, as well as to schools who are making the biggest gains with students. These assessments also provide teachers with real-time data, giving them the ability to address student needs before they're too late. Instead of fighting against all tests everywhere, those on the left who are frustrated with shallow NCLB-era tests should be on the frontlines of supporting these new technological advancements.
- **How can we assess learning in other areas?** Federal legislation requires students to be tested in math and reading at least once annually in grades 3-8, and once in high school, as well as in science at least once each grade span. This means that other important subject areas—such as the arts and social studies—are often put on the backburner, and that the assessment data we see can fail to reflect all of the true learning that's happening in the classroom. Knowing the literacy and numeracy abilities of students as they progress from grade to grade is critical, but it is also important to integrate other learning priorities into these assessments so that schools can create a better-rounded learning environment for students and better measure whether they are succeeding at that goal. Instead of fighting to throw out the math and reading tests for being too narrow, those who want to broaden the focus of our schools should be agitating to develop more holistic tests that can better measure multiple subject areas and competencies.

- **What other measures can we use to assess student learning?** The fact that lawmakers have

- **What Other Measures Can We Use to Assess Student Learning:** The fact that lawmakers have now definitively said that assessments are a necessary and valid measure of learning that are here to stay clears the space for a new and important conversation: how to expand the traditional testing portfolio to include new and innovative assessment tools. One of the most promising examples is the use of new competency-based and locally-developed assessments that a handful of states, most notably New Hampshire, are beginning to pilot.²³ While these measures engage teachers in the assessment development process, and thus increase teacher buy-in, we also must ensure that such testing pilots continue to give states the ability to compare student proficiency across district lines if they will ever truly be able to be used the way our current test data is deployed. For those who want to reduce fill-in-the-bubble tests, gaining a better understanding of how to make competency-based tests comparable from school to school and district to district should be a major priority.

New Normal #4: LIFO/Tenure

The old fight: *Should seniority be the sole factor in personnel decisions?*

The new normal: For decades, the structures supporting the hiring, firing, and promotion of teachers have been almost exclusively based on one factor alone: the number of years a teacher had been in the classroom. However, there has been a noticeable shift in the last few years to make more comprehensive measures—including performance on the job—play a more prominent role in these decisions. Today, 19 states require districts to consider performance during layoffs—up from 11 just three years earlier—and another 22 states forbid seniority from serving as the sole determinant when making such personnel decisions.²⁴ In addition, 23 states now take teacher performance into account before awarding tenure, a significant jump from zero, which is how many states did so before President Obama took office.²⁵ And in the handful of states where seniority continues to reign supreme, either through “last in, first out” (LIFO) policies or through the tenure process, the legality of such measures are being challenged in court on the basis that both policies deny low-income children a right to an equal education under state law—as these policies often relegate the newest teachers to the highest-need schools.²⁶ This means that regardless of what supporters of seniority-based policy say, these laws may be overturned whether they like it or not.

As a result, it is becoming more evident—although ending LIFO may not yet be a “new normal” to the same degree as other topics discussed above—that fighting to preserve today’s tenure and LIFO policies is a losing battle. The general public does not support seniority-only policies and would like to see tenure be a more meaningful marker for a teacher’s career.²⁷ And the high-achieving Millennials we need to recruit to fill our

classrooms want to enter a profession that will recognize and reward talent, not simply base

classrooms want to enter a profession that will recognize and reward talent, not simply base promotions and layoffs on number of years of service alone. As states continue to build out and implement more robust teacher evaluations that are capable of better differentiating performance, states are much better equipped to end the use of such quality-blind decision making. The question is: what will replace it?

The new debates: *How can we reshape the profession to give teachers more autonomy, greater responsibility, and better pay?*

- **What should tenure look like?** Historically, tenure was needed to protect teachers from dubious claims and unfair employment practices, such as firing a teacher who was pregnant or had a particular set of religious beliefs. But with modern labor laws preventing this type of behavior, tenure policy (which nearly every teacher earns) has moved far away from its initial intentions of guaranteeing that teachers receive due process into a system that now makes it nearly impossible to let go of a teacher unless egregious behavior is displayed. The answer is not to remove tenure altogether as some have suggested. But that may be the only option on the table if progressives don't take ownership of transforming tenure into a meaningful badge of honor for teachers—something that is earned and awarded for effort and accomplishment, not simply an automatic guarantee after a certain time spent in the classroom. For example, the process could more similarly mimic National Board Certification, which requires teachers to demonstrate proficiency in certain competencies. Or states could choose to reward teachers who teach in high need subjects or schools by creating an expedited tenure track that takes into account that service along with proof of their effectiveness. There are many possibilities and few working to flesh them out while too many are locked into a “yes or no” conversation about tenure.
- **What role should teachers play in tenure decisions?** Right now, teachers—who ostensibly have the most expertise about the field—play no role whatsoever in shaping the tenure process. Progressives can lead the way in changing this dynamic by building out the infrastructure that permits teachers themselves to play a bigger role when deciding who does and does not receive tenure. Similar to how the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards integrates teachers into the certification process by having them help develop competencies and serve as mentors and scorers to new teachers undertaking the process, states could use highly-distinguished tenured teachers to help develop and implement the tenure process in their states. For example, these teachers could serve on “tenure boards” and act as arbiters to determine who receives this important distinction, either as part of or separate from their own evaluation system. This process could be a way for Democrats to both champion a meaningful leadership opportunity for teachers and show them that we trust their professional expertise and judgment.
- **How can we protect the highest-need students during times of forced layoffs?** So long as

- **How can we protect the highest-need students during times of forced layoffs?** So long as seniority is allowed to be a sole or prominent determinant of layoff decisions, high-need schools will be disproportionately affected, as they tend to employ a higher proportion of less-experienced teachers. Progressive policymakers should not stand for allowing state budget cuts to disadvantage these schools even further by blindly removing teachers based on seniority alone. Organizations like Teach Plus have put out thoughtful proposals on how to make layoff decisions in a way that uses seniority as just one factor in a multi-measure approach.²⁸ This includes making sure that effectiveness is the first factor taken into account, followed by seniority as a tiebreaker when teachers of the same effectiveness level are at risk of losing their jobs. And there are other ways to protect high-need schools from the impacts of losing a large proportion of their teachers during such forced layoffs as well. For instance, cases like *Reed v. State of California* block schools that may otherwise experience excessive layoffs from having to follow the state's current reduction-in-force laws.²⁹ Progressives can and should be championing these policies to ensure low-income students aren't punished by seniority-only policies.
- **What type of career ladders will best attract and retain good teachers?** Jobseekers today want to have a clear understanding of how they can earn promotions and a better living throughout the trajectories of their careers. Third Way's own polling on high-achieving Millennials found that they listed "opportunities to advance within the profession," and "salaries for those established in the career" (in contrast to starting salary) as two of the most important factors taken into account when selecting a job—both areas where the teaching profession currently falls flat. One of the best ways policymakers can remedy this problem is to help states create new career ladder systems that recognize and promote talent in a meaningful way by giving excellent teachers greater responsibility and pay. Doing so is the best way to attract and retain the top talent we need to fill our classrooms over the next decade.

New Normal #5: Alternative Certification

The old fight: *Should teachers be able to earn their license through an alternative pathway like Teach For America?*

The new normal: The last two decades have also seen the proliferation of what are considered "alternative pathways" into the teaching profession, allowing teachers to skip traditional university preparation in favor of accelerated preparation programs, many of which are designed to fit more personalized training needs. Today, 1 in 5 teachers complete their training through an alternative route, up from 13% the year NCLB was passed.³⁰ Practically every state allows teachers to enter the profession through alternative pathways, with only three states—Ohio, North Dakota, and Wyoming—not reporting any "alternative" programs

in 2017 (however, this may have more to do with how the state defines "alternative" since

in 2014 (however, this may have more to do with how the state defines “alternative,” since each has exceptions permitting certain teachers to enter the state through non-traditional routes).³¹ And in addition to filling classrooms that could otherwise be left to a rotating bench of substitute teachers, alternative certification programs have played a unique role in identifying and training non-traditional teaching candidates, including those from more diverse backgrounds. In fact, Teach For America (TFA) has become both the largest and most diverse preparer of teacher candidates in the country, with 50% of last year’s incoming corps members identifying as people of color—compared to less than 20% of teachers that fit this demographic nationwide.³²

It would be untenable to think that the alternative certification pathway, or well-established organizations like Teach For America (which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year) will be going away anytime soon. This is particularly true given that the data indicates that, on average, alternatively certified teachers perform as well or better than their traditionally-trained peers.³³ Alternative certification programs present a more cost- and time-efficient option for candidates who may not want to make a lifelong commitment to teaching or to those who may want to enter as a second career. Even a report published by the NEA, one of the nation’s largest teachers’ unions, acknowledged the need to “embrace alternative teaching and learning entities,” recognizing that alternative certification programs are serving a higher proportion of diverse teaching candidates.³⁴ Rather than spend time trying to eliminate or put up extensive road blocks for alternative certification, progressives should figure out ways to support the teacher training programs whose graduates are doing an exemplary job for students—and shutter those programs who aren’t.

The new debate: *How can we make sure that all certification programs are truly preparing excellent teachers?*

- **How can we distinguish between good and bad alternative certification programs?** Similar to charter schools, not all alternative pathways into teaching are created equal. Lumping all alternative certification programs under one umbrella when discussing policy makes it seem as though a program allowing a person to walk off the street without even a high school diploma and step into a classroom is equivalent to an intensive alternative certification program like the Relay Graduate School of Education or The New Teacher Project’s Teaching Fellows program.³⁵ Rather than fight the existence of alternate routes into the profession, the real conversation could and should be focused on how we can create objective criteria that makes sure each program (alternative and traditional) meets a certain bar of rigor and quality for its candidates.

• **How can certification programs serve as vehicles for creating a more diverse teaching**

- How can certification programs serve as vehicles for creating a more diverse teaching profession?** Despite our increasingly diverse student population, the teaching profession itself remains overwhelmingly white.³⁶ Preparation programs have a unique opportunity to help close this gap through how they recruit and select candidates. This may be especially true for alternative certification programs that have the unique advantage of being able to serve a specific demographic or specialized group of teaching candidates. This allows alternative certification programs to serve as magnets to recruit a more diverse and talented pool of teachers into the profession, whether that be male candidates, teachers of color, those looking to enter teaching as a second career, military veterans, or teachers with specialized degrees. If it was less of a punching bag, alternative certification could be used as a vehicle for expanding the teaching base and recruiting candidates with a richer background of experience—a goal most progressives share.
- Can we use alternative pathways to better understand what works in preparation?** Since alternative certification programs are often free of many of the restraints that exist within a traditional university setting, alternative certification programs provide a unique opportunity to serve as laboratories of innovation for what does and doesn't work in teacher preparation. In particular, alternative certification routes can lead the way on best practices, including how to fairly track and measure alumni performance or how to support teachers even after their preparation formally ends. This type of accountability for alternative certification programs could in turn lead to innovative partnerships with districts who are interested in working much more closely with the programs that train their teachers, enabling them to hold these programs accountable for producing high quality candidates.

New Normal #6: Pensions

The old fight: *Should we preserve existing teacher pension systems for new teachers?*

The new normal: One of the biggest third rails in the education debate is the teacher retirement system. Most states have teachers and their employers pay into a defined benefit pension plan, which is designed to guarantee long-term employees an annuity upon retirement, often calculated by a formula that takes into account years of service and highest salary. This type of system may have worked well in an era when teachers taught in the same classroom for decades on end, but the reality is that it is becoming harder and harder for the majority of teachers in today's classrooms to access their full retirement benefits from these defined benefit pensions in our new mobile economy. In fact, a recent report by Bellwether Education Partners found that only 20% of teachers who enter the profession today will receive their full pension benefits, while less than half will be able to collect even a minimum pension.³⁷ To cope with severe budget shortfalls and insolvent pension systems, states have

raised their vesting times on average to anywhere between five to ten years, making it harder

raised their vesting times on average to anywhere between five to ten years, making it harder for most teachers who do not stay in the classroom for decades to qualify for benefits.

In addition, one of the little known facts about teacher retirement is that nearly 40% of teachers are not covered by Social Security.³⁸ The federal government requires the 15 states where teachers do not participate in that system to demonstrate parity in benefits through “safe harbor formulas,” but the reality is that these formulas fail to take into account vesting times, which according to Chad Aldeman of Bellwether Education Partners, results in “thousands, or possibly millions of teachers, not getting retirement benefits comparable to what they would be owed under Social Security.”³⁹ Leaving teachers less secure at retirement than most workers in this country certainly is an abandonment of progressive values. So while our laws may not have caught up to where we need them to be as has been the case with many of the previous “new normals,” public opinion and the reality most new teachers face makes it clear that they deserve a new way to secure their retirement. Failure to actually engage in a conversation around how to modernize these pension plans is tantamount to turning a blind eye to the millions of teachers who will not get a fair retirement under the current system, despite what they have already paid in.

The new debates: *How can we meet the retirement needs of teachers for generations to come?*

- **Why aren't all teachers in Social Security?** It is unconscionable to think that we would let nearly 1.2 million public school teachers slip through the cracks of one our country's most important safety nets. Given that the federal safe harbor formula fails to accurately account for the large number of teachers who leave the profession before they vest, it is becoming harder to defend having these teachers out of the system. Not only would adding these 1.2 million teachers into Social Security help to make the program itself more solvent, it would also give teachers the same safety net afforded to millions of other Americans. Democrats and progressives should lead the charge to start a conversation around what this shift could look like, similar to the process of transitioning federal employees into Social Security back in the 1980's.

• **Which retirement system will provide teachers the greatest monetary benefit? Most**

- Which retirement system will provide teachers the greatest monetary benefit?** Most teachers will not receive the retirement benefits they've earned today. But bygone are the days of having to choose between offering a defined benefit pension or a traditional 401(k). Some states have already begun to successfully implement new pension systems called cash balance plans, which are a hybrid of the more traditional retirement options. For example, similar to a defined benefit pension, cash balance plans provide less risk to employees because they are managed by the state and provide a guaranteed annuity upon retirement. On the other hand, they also mimic the positive aspects of a 401(k) by not back-loading benefits and being portable across state lines. And with NCTQ finding that "an average of 70 cents of every dollar contributed to state teacher pension systems is paying off pension debt," moving towards new retirement systems would also free up funding to pay for other important K-12 priorities—including higher teacher salaries.⁴⁰
- Which retirement systems will allow teachers to be mobile?** Today's workers are unlikely to stay in one job or one geographic location for the duration of their careers, and teachers are no exception. In fact, the "Multiple Generations at Work" survey indicates that Millennials will have an average of 12-15 jobs throughout the course of their lifetimes.⁴¹ Yet, the traditional defined benefit pension systems in which most teachers participate make it nearly impossible for teachers to transfer their full retirement wealth across state lines, preventing teachers from enjoying the same geographic mobility afforded in nearly every other profession. A 2010 report by Robert Costrell and Michael Podgursky found that a teacher can lose over *half* of his or her pension wealth simply by making one move between pension systems.⁴² No teacher should have to jeopardize his or her retirement because they choose to engage in the 21st century mobile economy, or because they must move to a new district or state due to forces outside of their control. Progressives should fight to ensure these teachers get the retirement benefits that fairly reflect the work they've put into the job—which means moving to more transferable pension systems.

Conclusion

There is little question that the world looks significantly different than it did back in the 1990s, yet if you read the headlines about education policy, you might think unions and education reformers have been stuck in a time warp. Continuing to engage in irrelevant conversations serves not only as a distraction from being able to engage in meaningful improvements, but it also repels Democratic policymakers who may otherwise be interested in shaping what new and more progressive policies could look like but are turned off by entering what seems to be a never-ending divide. Moving the conversation to these new debates would provide Democrats with a much more reality-based and nuanced way to enter the education conversation while staying true to their own progressive values. By acknowledging each of these "new normals" and pivoting to the next set of conversations we need to have about how to improve our nation's schools, progressives could dominate education policy debates

HOW TO IMPROVE OUR NATION'S SCHOOLS, PROGRESSIVES COULD DOMINATE EDUCATION POLICY DEBATES for years to come.

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