

Experienced Teachers Deserve Respect

by Ed Doherty

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Most people facing open-heart surgery would seek out an experienced doctor who has successfully performed the operation over a number of years. Very few, if any, would search for a young man or woman just out of medical school with scant experience. The same would hold true for people looking for a lawyer to represent them in an important legal proceeding. Their first choice would probably be the firm's senior partner, not the rookie, just out of law school, who has only appeared a handful of times before a judge. In medicine and law, experience is valued. There is a presumption that those who have been in these professions for a number of years have talent, knowledge, and ability that exceeds that of their younger colleagues.

Unfortunately, in the field of education, the notion that experience is a positive attribute in one's professional life is not as prevalent. For example, a recent Boston Globe editorial (Bargain or Face the Ballot, January 16) lamented the idea that "young, talented teachers" could lose their positions to "veteran teachers." Experienced teachers are often characterized as burnt-out, lazy, unfamiliar with new methodologies, and too old to relate well with students; while younger recruits are enthusiastic, energetic, eager, and committed. The message coming from this distorted picture is that younger is better

and that seniority rights in teacher contracts are an obstacle to keeping younger teachers in classrooms; therefore, these rights for teachers must be eliminated.

In Massachusetts an attack on teachers' seniority rights is currently being spearheaded by "Stand for Children," an organization whose innocuous name has nothing to do with its real agenda. One only has to look at some of Stand for Children's major donors, including Bain Capital and the Walton Family Foundation (Walmart), to realize that what it "stands" for is Big Business and not for children. These are organizations that like to be able to say, "you're fired," without worrying about such things as fairness, due process or anti-discrimination protections.

Stand for Children's major strategy in its attack on teachers' rights is to place a ballot question before voters next fall that would restrict teachers' collective bargaining rights around issues of evaluation, assignments, and transfers. Further, it would prohibit the use of seniority as a determining factor in teacher layoffs. Stand for Children's claim is that seniority protects "bad" teachers, and that the goal of the ballot question is to ensure that all students have excellent teachers.

This is another distortion. The reality is that seniority does not protect anyone from being evaluated by their supervisors and being dismissed if his or her performance does not measure up to expectations. It does not matter whether a teacher has been teaching for two years or for forty-two years, that person can be fired if he or she is unable or unwilling to do the job well.

Seniority rights are not a protection for bad teachers; on the contrary, these rights are a protection for good teachers. Seniority is a protection against capricious and arbitrary decisions by the employer, and further, these rights act as a barrier to prevent age discrimination, racial bias, or any other form of prejudice. Seniority rights prevent school districts from firing higher paid teachers in order to replace them with teachers on the lower salary steps. Seniority allows experienced teachers to advocate for children and to have a voice in educational decisions; and, when necessary, to disagree with a principal or superintendent or school committee member without fear of retribution or job loss.

Attacks on our teachers' rights are totally unwarranted given the outstanding work of our state's teachers. For the past four years Massachusetts has been rated number one in the nation in student achievement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in both math and reading. This is an incredible record. Our teachers deserve a great deal of the credit for our students' outstanding academic performance. The experience and dedication of our teachers should be valued and respected, just as we value experience and dedication in other professions. Our teachers do not deserve to have their reasonable protections and legitimate rights abolished.