



## Book Review of *Class Warfare: The Reformers' Case*

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If a Connecticut school board member, say, Rip Van Winkle, fell asleep in 2008 and awoke in 2011, he would be amazed by the changes now taking effect in public education. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are living through the largest transformation of politics, legislation, culture and implementation of change that we have ever seen in public education.

Much of that is due to those who consider themselves “educational reformers”. With the strong support of President Obama and Education Secretary Duncan, foundations, philanthropists, hedge-fund managers and state legislative leaders have guided change. The changes mostly have focused on four areas: vast increases in the number of charter schools; a more rigorous teacher evaluation system, including using student achievement data to determine teacher effectiveness; establishment of merit or differentiated teacher pay systems in contrast to the traditional salary schedule; and eliminating the often statutorily required last in-first out (LIFO) system for layoffs in school districts.

Steven Brill, who, among other things, teaches journalism at Yale, has written *Class Warfare*, which is essentially a history of the Obama initiatives in education. The history is filled with stories about the “cast of characters”, including Duncan, Michelle Rhee, the former Washington, D.C., Superintendent; former Chancellor of New York City Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg; and President of the American Federation of Teachers Randi Weingarten. It also is peppered with stories about teachers, Teach for America, State Boards of Education, particularly the Board of Regents in New York, and the foundations and businessmen who have bankrolled this effort.

### Race to the Top

The Race to the Top (RTTT) competition was the real catalyst for much of the change. And, Brill deals with it in much detail.

There is much discussion of what the applications would require, the vetting process and the vetters themselves who worked on the RTTT applications from almost every state. For example, the vetters could not be those “involved in running school systems, active in reform or those who consulted for any state or local school systems”. Thus, no one with current experience in the schools could be a vetter or add current information to the process.

Brill provides information on why some states did well and others, which might have been similar to a successful state, did not. Further, he described how the federal Department of Education scored the applications, doled out the money and pushed the reformers’ agenda. The application was, according to Brill, “unrelentingly prescriptive”, which, she says, the reformers loved.

When those in Connecticut were learning from SDE (our State Department of Education) what the applications required, I remember saying to officials that checking off boxes, in a literal race to get points with very tough deadlines, was an awful way to make public policy. Due to the recession, everyone was chasing the money, at the cost of making hurriedly analyzed decisions.

Despite this, many Connecticut changes have been positive. For example, local and statewide discussions about the importance of teachers in the classroom are taking place including the critical role that appropriate evaluations and use of data to support those evaluations. Brill also writes about individual school districts that have turned down the RTTT money because the cost to implement the work is more than they are getting from the federal government.

Followers of the reform initiatives will not be surprised by much in the book. However, the quotes from reformers and others makes for fascinating reading and supports some of the “scuttlebutt” that has been part of these huge initiatives.

### Teachers Unions Won't Love this Book

Good reason exists for teacher unions to dislike this book—until the last few pages. The book basically

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blasted teacher unions throughout as the biggest obstacle for what the reformers saw (and still see), to success in raising student achievement. According to Brill, teacher unions, usually those affiliated with the National Education Association, put obstacles in the way of virtually every part of moving the reform agenda through legislatures and state boards of education.

But, at the end (and I mean *the end*—the last 20 pages or so) Brill talks about the need for collaboration with the unions in order to help teachers provide quality education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. He describes the need for teachers to receive adequate preparation and training, lots of feedback, introspection and to hold high expectations for all students. In a comment that would rankle the reformers because of their urgency to make change, he also states that making the reforms and ensuring they work will take time.

Interestingly, he raises the question of how much time is needed before a teacher should receive tenure. I remember from *Outliers*, by Malcom Gladwell, that it takes about 10,000 hours before one becomes an expert in a field. If this were true for teachers, it would mean that it might take 6.76 years, assuming 185 eight-hour days each year to master their profession. Maybe receiving tenure should take close to that long.

Brill also discusses the fact that teachers are the largest contributors to the Democratic Party and yet, it is Democrats, including the hedge fund managers, who brought up this new agenda. Obama had long talked about the need for change in education, but the changes and the threats to the position of the unions in the Democratic Party are pretty mind-boggling.

## Where Are the School Boards?

Bothersome and concerning to me was the lack of any real discussion of boards of education. It is as if boards (and superintendents other than those few Brill wrote about) are invisible or play so little part that they weren't worthy of much mention in the 437

page book.

Obviously, volunteer school board members and those whose careers are about serving boards should be very concerned about what this lack of discussion means. I would argue that boards in individual communities, though not so much in New York City or Washington, where the action is centered in this book, continue to play a critical role in ensuring that student achievement increases.

Is this a case of the boards not being involved in the policymaking? Is it an oversight? Or does Brill think of boards (and their representatives) as irrelevant?

## Mr. Brill, in Connecticut, School Boards are Critical

In Connecticut, where we did not get the money, but are still subject to changes in the law spear-headed by the RTTT application process, school boards are even more important in ensuring that the changes, especially the required ones, are implemented in a positive, beneficial way with the discussion necessary at the local level so that there is appropriate buy-in by the school community, the town or city government and the public.

While Brill quoted Klein as saying that “collaboration is the elixir of the status-quo crowd”, I would argue that it is this working-through of problems which finds the best solutions that work in Connecticut. While maybe the RTTT process did get us through some of the decades-long obstacles to better teaching and more learning, it is by dealing with the issues in a comprehensive, thought-through process that will work the best for our students.

This book is recommended reading if you are interested in gaining a better understanding of recent change in American public schools and the course we are on in Connecticut.

Or, like Board Member Rip Van Winkle, you can awake and get involved, become knowledgeable and provide your own input into this amazing transformation.