TEACHING ASPIRES TO BECOME A PROFESSION, yet it faces two daunting obstacles. First, public school teachers cling to unprofessional salary schedules and terms of employment that make it impossible to pay them based on their performance and market demand. Second, the unions that bargain these terms are modeled not on professional associations, but on the industrial unions of the early and mid-20th century. The right model for the teacher unions is the medieval craftsman guilds, the hallmarks of which were professional ability and demonstrated accomplishment.

The unions—namely the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), plus their various local satellites—stand in the way of professionalism through sins of both commission and omission. Contrary to popular opinion, their sins of omission present the more serious problem.

The unions’ sins of commission have largely to do with bread-and-butter issues of salary and job protections. For today’s public school teachers, unlike most professionals, time in the saddle rather than performance determines where they work, how much they are paid, and whether they can be fired. Imagine a symphony orchestra in which the first violin automatically goes to the most senior violinist (or worse yet, to the most senior musician, regardless of instrument). This is what happens in most school districts, where senior teachers often get

**Teachers will learn**

**that industrial-style unionism and genuine professionalism don’t mix**

by DENIS P. DOYLE
to pick their schools and the courses they teach.

The unions’ sins of omission are revealed in their lack of interest in the life of the mind. No one would accuse most public schools of being communities of scholars. Attended by unwilling and bored students, they are staffed by workers rather than professionals. It was not teachers or their unions who led the fight for academic standards or for rigorous testing for themselves or their students. They did not fight the relentless consolidation of schools and school districts during the 20th century. Nor do they actively support rationalization of the clock and calendar; they continue to work to agrarian rhythms in a high-tech era. Perhaps most important is their failure to demand technologies that increase output.

If anyone doubts the lack of interest in intellectual pursuits among public educators, consider this true story. A member of Congress for whom I once worked, Leo Ryan, had been a public school teacher in Nebraska, where he rose to become the youngest superintendent in the state. When he discovered that teachers’ pay in California was higher than superintendents’ pay in Nebraska, he headed west in a hurry. But when he arrived he discovered that without a California credential he could not accept the teaching job he had been offered (let alone become a California superintendent). He was forced to forgo teaching in summer school (and the income associated with it) and take a bevy of mindless courses to get his credential. He never forgave the state licensing authorities. When he became a state legislator years later, he sponsored legislation that transformed the licensing system. On the coffee table in his office, he displayed a bound dissertation as an example of just how bogus he thought graduate education degrees were: the title was “The Use and Placement of the Pencil Sharpener in the Elementary School Classroom.”

Psychic Income

In contrast to the teacher union is the solitary teacher, portrayed with uncommon sympathy and insight by Ted Sizer in Horace’s Compromise. Sizer paints a compelling and dispiriting portrait of the teacher who tries to rise above the mendacity of the system. His most powerful tool is the “deal” he makes with students; he will not disturb them if they return the favor. He meets the ambitious and curious student on her own ground but leaves the surly and turned-off student to his own devices. The conundrum is captured by Seymour Fliegel, president of the Center for Educational Innovation, when he reminds us that too often the teacher says, “I taught him to swim, but he still sinks.”

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The problem is compounded by two circumstances. Many teachers enter the ranks for the same humdrum reasons people find employment in the larger labor market—propinquity, accident, force of habit, good or bad advice, inertia, convenience. This collection of motives does not inspire much confidence, but neither does it guarantee mediocrity. People who casually enter the teaching workforce may nonetheless become inspired teachers. But no matter how or why individuals become teachers, there is no conceivable way to recruit and retain three million Mr. Chips. As management guru Peter Drucker observes, the challenge of mass education is to get ordinary people to do extraordinary things, teachers no less than students.

More to the point of this essay, however, is that many of the people who are attracted to teaching find it appealing because they want to do good, not necessarily well. These are the people who define the enterprise. For such people, teaching is a vocation, which, as Webster’s reminds us, comes from the Latin vocatio, or summons, bidding, invitation. These are the teachers who aspire to be professionals, which as Webster’s also reminds us has a special meaning. A profession is:

A calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work.
which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service.

The empirical basis of this formulation is revealed by the simple fact that the lion’s share of teachers’ income is, as economists say, psychic rather than real. In other words, teachers are often compensated in ways that do not involve money—by enjoying the work and making a difference in students’ lives. To be sure, real income is important, but psychic income is even more important. This condition explains why good teachers go into the profession and why they stay. But if teachers do not live by bread alone, they do not live without bread either. This explains why teachers join unions, particularly when they are working in large, impersonal bureaucracies. Consider the fact that teachers almost universally discount their wages in order to teach in private schools. They teach for less than their public school counterparts because their sense of professional efficacy is greater. Both state regulations and union contracts have produced such a deprofessionalized teaching environment in the public schools that it takes higher pay and more benefits to get and keep teachers there. In the other learned professions, the opposite phenomenon obtains. Doctors, accountants, and lawyers often discount their wages in the public sector as a training regimen or because they find the work more enjoyable. When they enter the private sector, where, as many corporate lawyers will tell you, the work is far less fulfilling, they do so with the expectation of greater income. In education’s public sector, by contrast, the work is actually less interesting than it is in private schools, where teachers enjoy more control over the curriculum and more autonomy in the classroom. As a result, teachers are willing to work for less in the private sector.

A New Metaphor for Teaching
The deprofessionalized atmosphere in public schools also helps to explain why teachers join unions modeled on the industrial unions of skilled and semi-skilled workers rather than medieval guilds or modern professional associations. Rather than working as sole proprietors or in small professional partnerships, teachers must negotiate with remote managers of large organizations, as an autoworker at Ford would. They don’t control entry to their profession, as lawyers and doctors do, so they must find other means of battling for higher wages and better benefits.

But teaching as a profession is doomed to fail as an assembly-line enterprise. The assembly line was created by Henry Ford for a reason: to make work so routinized and simple that anyone with deft hands, a strong back, and an adequate constitution could perform it. Ford’s workforce was made up of internal migrants (from the countryside to the city) and immigrants from overseas, workers who were neither skilled nor socialized to the emerging industrial era. They shared one trait, an eagerness to work for wages. The assembly line not only created interchangeable parts, but was also manned by workers who were themselves interchangeable. The skilled guild member, by contrast, had a talent that was the antithesis of the assembly line, the ability to create unique objects. Imagine buying a “signed” car or dishwasher.

This same impulse led to the early 20th-century efforts to “teacher proof” the classroom. During the heyday of scientific management, the production
line became the metaphor of choice in education—teachers are the workers, students the products, administrators the foremen and straw bosses, school board members the board of directors, and taxpayers the shareholders. The task of teacher trainers—the school of education—was to make the work of the teacher so carefully scripted that anyone could do it. This impulse is still with us, having reappeared most recently in the school district of which I am an alumnus, Chicago. A major reform of then-superintendent Paul Vallas (now superintendent of the Philadelphia schools) was to “script” the curriculum for elementary-school teachers across the district. While this action was a necessary throwback to the last century, it demonstrates how intellectually impoverished modern schooling is.

Commenting on the production-line metaphor, Al Shanker tartly observed that if one quarter of the “products” don’t reach the end of the assembly line and another quarter don’t work when they get there, you don’t improve output by running the line faster and longer. It is time to abandon the factory model and replace it with a more appropriate one. Indeed, if a production metaphor is called for, the model of choice would be the human capital–rich environment in Silicon Valley’s information technology shops. In the factory of the 20th century, at day’s end the owner locked the gates to secure his capital. In today’s high-tech firm, at day’s end the “capital” goes home to have a drink. The wealth in the modern firm is human, not physical, capital.

Raising Productivity

While productivity improves regularly in Silicon Valley, and its products in turn raise the rest of the nation’s productivity, teacher unions have refused to entertain the notion of increasing output with a given set of inputs. At a minimum this requires new technologies and new techniques, the substitution of capital for labor, and the substitution of cheaper for more expensive labor. Teachers must take a page from the farmer’s book and use science and common sense to increase output. Educators need the equivalent of the tractor, contour plowing, and hybridization. There is some discussion within the profession and some provisional use of distinctions among teachers along a qualitative spectrum—with corresponding salary differentials—as there is among lawyers and doctors, but the talk is still mainly just talk.

The idea of senior or master teachers’ overseeing the training and induction of probationary teachers is so obvious that its absence is unforgivable. Indeed, one of the great strengths of the artist’s guild is the progression from apprentice to novice to journeyman to master. It is removed in name only from the world of medicine, where the student progresses from medical school to intern, resident, head resident, staff physician, and head of service. And in many hospitals, doctors are too valuable to be drafted into administrative positions. Instead, professional hospital administrators are hired who are not themselves medical doctors; typically they report to a committee of physicians.

Another way to improve productivity, where computers can make a difference in education (or could make a difference), is to actively substitute computers for teachers. Not one for one (though as computerized instruction gains in power and finesse that could occur), but as a way to relieve teachers of trivial activities and to provide anytime, anywhere instructional resources for students. This is hardly a new idea among policy wonks and computer buffs, but it is not actively pursued by teachers or their organizations.

The failure to grapple with issues of productivity
(or the value added by teaching) makes it impossible to tie compensation to productivity increases, as occurs in the rest of the economy.

New Developments
As Bruce Cooper and Marie-Elena Liotta observe in their fine monograph Urban Teacher Unions Face Their Future, the AFT and the NEA are mature organizations. While in their modern incarnation they are only half a century old, they may be so ossified by now that they can no longer change. They are caught in a time warp, not yet recognizing that their success in the last half of the 20th century is the path to failure in the 21st. There is as yet no coherent vision of what the profession is or should become. The teacher unions are trapped in archaic organizational models characterized by buildings and districts that are too large and too fragmented, compulsory attendance, the 180-day school year, the 50-minute period, age-grouping of students in 13 discrete grades, few performance or standards-based activities, and inaccurate assumptions about the dangers of privatization.

Whither the teacher unions? There is always the possibility, however remote, that thoughtful change will occur. The embodiment of this possibility is found in two organizations, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the competing American Board for Certification of Teaching Excellence. Both boards self-consciously attempt to take a page from medicine’s book. At the beginning of the 20th century, medicine was much like education today: more art than science. As the practice of medicine matured, the various subdisciplines within it began to clean their own houses, beginning with the ophthalmologists, the first doctors to establish specialized board certification.

Similarly, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards offers an advanced certificate that is supposed to signal mastery of the knowledge and skills necessary to be an effective teacher. The National Board is now more than a decade old and growing rapidly. While it is silent on the key question of “value added,” the board establishes an important set of precedents, namely that the “profession”—with some advice from thoughtful outsiders—can establish standards for itself and wrestle with some tough issues surrounding performance identification and documentation. It also establishes the principle that some teachers should be paid more than others.

The American Board tackles the toughest issue of all, linking teacher performance to student performance, but this program is in its infancy. And short of market forces’ operating in the K–12 realm, it is hard to imagine imposing this linkage—and its implications for pay and organization—on unwilling teacher unions. If past is prologue, they will fight it to the end. As the world’s most famous union leader, Lech Walesa, reminded us, there is no command-control device available to bureaucracies to crack that whip: “We pretend to work and the state pretends to pay us.”

In the final analysis, however, the teacher unions must grasp the nettle if they are to survive in recognizable form. If they fail to do so they will be abandoned by their more ambitious members and the public, which has, so far at least, supported them. Like the mythic Marxist state, they will wither away.

The notion of “board certification” establishes the principle that some teachers should be paid more than others.

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