

# Great Teachers in the Classroom?

*It depends on raising the competence of a workforce of millions*

## **Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools**

By Steven Brill

*Simon & Schuster, 2011, \$28.00; 496 pages.*

### *As reviewed by Nathan Glazer*

Steven Brill's *Class Warfare* must be the most prominently reviewed book on education in decades: a lengthy front-page review by Sara Mosle in the *New York Times Book Review*, a lead review by Joel Klein in the *Wall Street Journal*, a critical follow-up piece on Brill on the news pages of the *Times* by Michael Winerip. Brill has had a varied career, founding *The American Lawyer* magazine and Court TV, writing books on the teamsters and on the effects of 9/11, but he had not dealt with American schools until he wrote a sensational article for *The New Yorker* on the "rubber rooms," the rooms in which New York City teachers whom the administration believes should be fired spend their days and years—an average of three—getting their salaries, accruing their benefits, and doing nothing while the arbitration procedures dictated by the union contract grind on.

*Class Warfare* takes a wider view but one clearly influenced by the experience of the irrationality and inefficiency imposed by lengthy union contracts, which dictate in detail what can and cannot be done in disciplining or, indeed, leading and guiding teachers. For Brill and the reformers in his book, the unions are the enemy, with their defense of incompetent teachers, their hostility to charters, and their resistance to efforts to judge teachers by the achievement of their students on tests.

Those who are trying to reform American schools are to Brill defined by their embrace of these measures. Brill tells the story of reform, particularly during the brief years of the Obama administration, beginning with the Race to the Top, through the experience of a varied group of reformers. He begins with a number of individuals shaped by their early experience in Teach For America (TFA), and he follows them and their careers—in New Orleans, Colorado, Washington, and

and Bill Gates. Interestingly, almost all his reformers are Democrats, who face the problem of reconciling measures opposed by the teachers unions with the reality that these are the solidest supporters of Democratic legislators, governors, and presidents. Along the way, Brill gives background on Albert Shanker and the rise of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the 1983 report of President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education and what presidents have done since, the creation of TFA by Wendy Kopp, and on David Levin and KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) and other successful efforts to create charter schools.

New York City, about whose public schools, teachers, and unions Brill learned a great deal in his research on the "rubber rooms," looms large in the accounts, and recurrently we are introduced to Joel Klein struggling with the union on a new contract. Brill generally presents him announcing some victory, which on close examination seems less like a concession than it did at first glance. In his review of Brill's book, Klein defends himself: the contract of 2005 resulted in "ending forced placement of teachers in schools based on seniority, recapturing a 45-minute period that had previously been given over to teachers..., eliminating certain grievance procedures, and extending the school day for some 300,000 struggling students by 150 minutes a week." Of course, the perspectives of writer and of administrator, hemmed in by a legislature bound to the union, in a state in which almost everything needs legislative approval, must differ.

And yet in the book itself we learn the limitation of, for example, the ending of "forced placement." Yes, teachers

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New York—episodically through the book. They are supplemented in his account by political insiders; by Wall Streeters who have developed an interest in education reform; by vigorous administrators trying to implement reform measures, such as Joel Klein, Michelle Rhee, Mark Roosevelt of Pittsburgh, and others; and by billionaire philanthropists such as Eli Broad

could not on the basis of their seniority impose themselves on a principal who did not want them, but neither could they be assigned to a school they did not want to teach in. Brill writes, “If either the principal or the teacher did not agree on a placement, then the teacher would stay in limbo as long as it took... but still on the payroll....” The result: “Within five years there would be more than one thousand teachers sitting on a list called the Absent Teacher Reserve. These were the teachers who had been excessed but had not taken positions elsewhere.”

One would have thought the scandal exposed by the rubber-room article would have led to correction, and indeed it did—to some extent. The rubber room had been radically reduced by the time of Brill’s book, from 744 to 83 teachers. But only 33 had been terminated as a result of arbitration. “Another 154 had been allowed to resign (typically in return for receiving some kind of severance payment and being able to keep their pensions)...474...had been...‘returned to service.’ Some went back into classrooms. But in a deft bureaucratic shell game, most of them—272 of these 474 cases—were simply added to the Absent Teacher Reserve list, where they were still paid to do nothing.”

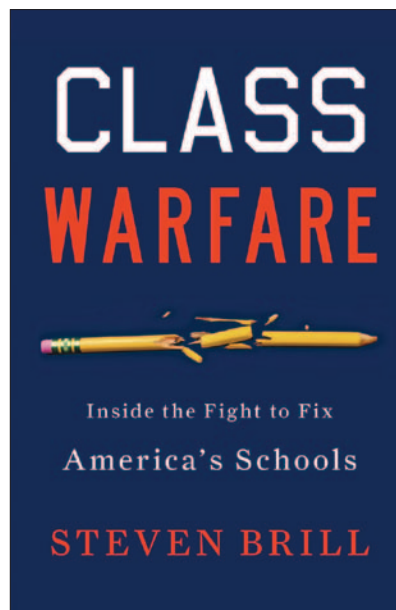
Race to the Top, launched by a Democratic administration, did propose to give large sums to states (but still a pittance of their huge expenditures on public education), which, as part of a general plan for improvement, adopted certain of the favored reform measures, allowing the formation of charter schools and introducing evaluation and compensation of teachers based on the results achieved by their pupils. The necessary legislation has followed in many states, but Brill is not persuaded:

in New York State, there is the proviso that “nothing in the law could override existing union contracts.” The procedures prescribed in union contracts remain valid. And, indeed, despite the law, the union is still disputing in the courts the degree to which tested student progress can be taken into account in evaluating teachers.

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In conversation with David Levin at a New York KIPP school, Brill faces up to the enormous strain on teachers in KIPP and other achieving charter schools and in TFA, a strain that they can take for a few years but will not choose for a lifetime. Substantial improvement in the education of American schoolchildren has to be based not on those rare individuals who are willing to do this, but on raising the level of competence of a workforce of millions. Can one believe that the practices of those millions can be changed for the better by the competition of charter schools (1.5 million children versus 50 million in district schools), by promotion and compensation and dismissal based on test scores of their classes, by the elimination of “last in, first out” layoff rules? All would do some good. Could they amount to a revolution?

Brill proposes a radical step for New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg: appoint Randi Weingarten, president



of the AFT, to the post of chancellor of the New York City schools. (“Never in a million years,” says the mayor.) As concerned about her place in history as Al Shanker was, Weingarten would find ways to do the right thing. The teachers and the unions have to be brought into the reform movement. Brill titles this last,

surprising chapter “A Marathon, Not a Sprint.” Sara Mosle, in her judicious review in the *New York Times*, notes that although 1 percent of the New York City teachers may have been in the rubber room, 20 percent of teachers quit after the first year, and 40 percent have left after three years. Is the pay too low, the job too hard, are the wrong people recruited, and the wrong people staying? Dealing effectively with any one of these questions seems beyond the reach of the favored reforms that are at the heart of Brill’s account, worthy as they are.

I should note that Brill concentrates exclusively on those measures around which battles with the unions have been fought. There is almost nothing on possible changes in pedagogy, in school organization and structure, in curriculum: E. D. Hirsch is not mentioned, the push for a national curriculum gets only a few paragraphs. All these have to be part of the marathon.

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