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## Don't Blame the Teachers

BY DIANE RAVITCH

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Recently, I attended yet another one of those conferences where leaders of American industry, commerce, and government get together to decide what to do about our schools.

The meeting proceeded through the now-familiar litany of bad news: American students perform poorly on international tests as compared to their peers in Europe and Asia.

American graduate programs in science and engineering have relatively few American-born students and lots of foreign students. India and China are grabbing more and more of the world's technical jobs because their students are better educated and, I might add, lower paid.

We are losing the brain race to our economic competitors.

We have heard all of this before, for at least the past 25 years.

When the time comes to talk about solutions, the conversation and the remedies always seem to focus on teachers. The line goes like this: Our students are not learning because our teachers are not smart enough, are lazy, don't care, get paid regardless of their effectiveness, and so on.

So, once again, out come the usual solutions to our nation's education problems: Incentivize teaching. End tenure. Adopt schemes for merit pay, performance pay, bonus pay. Pay teachers according to the test scores of their students. If student test scores go up, their teachers get more money. If student test scores don't go up, their teachers get extra professional development, and if need be, are fired.

After sitting through another day of discussion in which the teacher was identified as the chief cause of our nation's education woes, I felt that something was amiss. It's not as if there is a failure to weed out ineffective teachers — about 40% who enter the profession will leave within their first five years, frustrated by their students' lack of effort, their administrators' heavy hand, unpleasant physical conditions in their workplace, or their own inability to cope with the demands of the classroom.

I have not met all three million of our nation's teachers, but every one that I have met is hardworking, earnest, and deeply committed to their students. All of them talk about parental lack of support for children, about a popular culture that ridicules education and educators, and about the frustrations of trying to awaken a love of

learning in children who care more about popular culture, their clothing, and their social life than mastering the wonders of science, history, and mathematics.

This is a tangled skein of causation, to be sure, but I have a radical idea. Next time there is a conference about the state of American education — or the problems found in each and every school district — why don't we take a hard look at why so many of our students are slackers? Why don't we look at the popular culture and its effects on students' readiness to apply themselves to learning? Why don't we investigate the influence of the role models of "success" that surround our children in the press? Why don't we ask how often our children see models of success who are doctors, nurses, educators, scientists, engineers, and others who enable our society to function and who contribute to our common good?

It's time to stop beating up on teachers and ask why so many of our children arrive in school with poor attitudes toward learning. If the students aren't willing to work hard, if they aren't hungry to succeed, then even the best teachers in the world — laden with merit pay, bonuses, and other perks — are not going to make them learn.

Every article and book about successful education systems in other nations say that their students are "hungry" for education, "hungry" for the learning that will propel them and their families to a better life. Our children — with too few exceptions — don't have that hunger. It's not the fault of their teachers.

We will continue to misdiagnose our educational needs until we focus on the role of students and their families. If they don't give a hoot about education, if the students are unwilling to pay attention in class and do their homework after school, if they arrive in school with a closed and empty mind, don't blame their teachers.

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