



## Talking About Teachers and Teachers' Unions Toolkit: Frequently Asked Questions

*This document is not intended to provide “the right answers” to questions you might be asked, but rather to offer illustrations of how to more effectively communicate about the role of teachers and teachers’ unions. In the following question and answer sequence, we demonstrate how an advocate might think about turning unproductive frames embedded in questions into opportunities to advance a more effective message. Communicators will find their own ways of putting these illustrative principles into practice.*

### **Q: What is the role of teachers in education reform?**

#### *Less Effective Response:*

There is no quick fix for the American education system. Reform is hard and it takes adults working together to ensure that all students receive a quality education. Instead of playing the blame game, what’s needed most is collaboration. We must work together to figure out how to fix what’s broken and strengthen what’s working.

Identifying viable solutions and implementing them is hard work. Despite portrayals of teachers in recent news headlines and documentaries, the teachers who work in America’s public schools and classrooms are finding ways to change the lives of students every day.

#### *Analysis:*

- Relies on the concept of collaboration as a value, which was found to be ineffective in promoting a positive role for teachers’ unions as part of the education reform efforts.

- Reminds the reader of negative views about teachers and teachers' unions ("blame game," "headlines and movies").
- Doesn't help people see the many parts of the education system that exist beyond teachers and the classroom and that can impede or promote their efforts.

*More Effective Response:*

It's unrealistic to think there is a quick fix for the American education system. Successful reform will require us to put effective, proven programs in place to ensure that all students receive a quality education. What's needed most is a step-by-step, practical approach to figure out how to fix what's broken and strengthen what's working. A way to do that is to rely upon the professional networks of teachers and school administration and compare the methods teachers use when working with school administration and professional organizations.

Teachers need to be equipped to help identify these feasible solutions and implement them, increasing student success every day.

*Analysis:*

- Uses the value of Pragmatism to build support for education reform and to explain why the current system is not working and what should be done to make it work better.
- Takes a positive approach to education reform and the positive role teachers play in such reform efforts.
- Gets more education system into the conversation on reform.

**Q: Improving teacher quality is one of the top subjects being debated today. What makes a good teacher?**

*Less Effective Response:*

Good teachers are not born; rather, they are made, through rigorous recruitment, preparation, induction and continuous professional development. Teaching is a profession built on the hard work, reflection, care, persistence and intellect of great teachers. We must do everything we can to ensure we protect the profession and provide our students with an education that will truly

prepare them for the future.

Good teachers have high expectations for their students, and use a variety of materials and resources to plan lessons, monitor instruction and assess student learning. Good teachers know the value of collaborating with other teachers, parents and administrators to ensure that students are successful. Good teachers understand that teaching is not merely pouring content into children. It is about facilitating learning: motivating children to learn, giving them the support necessary to develop skills and knowledge, and helping them overcome problems and assume responsibility for their actions and their learning.

*Analysis:*

- Inadvertently reinforces the belief that “teachers are born, not made” by restating the claim.
- Reinforces the cultural model of “caring teachers” and “intrinsic motivation” as the most important factor in teacher quality (hard work, care, persistence, etc.) and in student success.

*More Effective Response:*

Good teachers can be carefully and systematically cultivated through rigorous recruitment, preparation, training, and continuous professional development. Like the scaffolding required to help builders share resources and materials needed to construct a building, teachers need to be connected to the knowledge, skills and resources they need to do a great job. We must do everything we can to ensure we provide strong scaffolding for all teachers so that they can build students’ brains and provide them with an education that will truly prepare them for the future.

Good teachers that have access to the resources they need to teach effectively are able to use a variety of materials and resources to plan lessons, monitor instruction and assess student learning – all of which benefit and support their students. When good teachers are connected to a network of resources, they are able to collaborate with other teachers, parents, and administrators to ensure that students are successful. Good teachers understand that teaching is about effectively facilitating learning – that is, engaging children in new subjects, giving them the support necessary to develop skills and knowledge, and helping them overcome problems that stand in the way of learning.

*Analysis:*

- Uses the metaphor/simplifying model Scaffolding to explain what teachers need to be successful and why teacher networks and resources contribute to student learning.
- Moves the focus away from public sentiment that good teachers are “caring” and have other innate qualities, and instead points to resources that help improve the quality of teaching and teaching effectiveness.

**Q: What about teacher pay? Shouldn't teachers whose students do better get paid more for their performance, rather than basing pay on seniority and education?**

*Less Effective Response:*

Too many educators have been denied competitive, professional pay for too long. Attracting and retaining qualified school staff requires salaries that are competitive with comparable professions.

Low teacher pay comes at a high cost for schools and kids, who lose good teachers to better-paying professions. Some 20 percent of new public school teachers leave the profession by the end of the first year, and almost half leave within five years.

*Analysis:*

- Doesn't address public's belief that teachers should not be motivated by money.
- Misses the opportunity to make the positive case in support of teachers' unions beyond teacher pay and benefits.

*More Effective Response:*

The real issue is how to support effective teachers in our nation's schools. We can only do this by taking initiatives that we know to be successful and implementing these solutions in a commonsense way. One thing we know is that teacher retention is critical. It makes sense that teachers increase their skills as their experience increases, which leads to more effective teaching. There are many ways to support and retain good teachers, including offering pay that is competitive with comparable professions and making sure that teachers have access to the resources they need to do their jobs well.

*Analysis:*

- Uses the value of Pragmatism and a consistent practical tone to promote a positive “can do” spirit that is needed to build support for teachers as part of the solution for education reform.
- Focuses on the professionalization of teaching by pointing to the importance of giving teachers the resources they need to support high-quality student learning in addition to receiving competitive pay.

**Q: Why do teachers get tenure after two or three years so that bad teachers can't be fired?***Less Effective Response:*

Eliminating tenure is presented as the silver bullet of education reform. But tenure laws were originally passed to protect teachers from arbitrary action on the part of administrators, school boards, and parents. We need due process for teachers to prevent them from being fired for inadequate or wrong reasons.

In actuality, it's not tenure itself that's the problem. Poor administrators are to blame for not properly evaluating and getting rid of underperforming teachers. Tenure protects teachers from abuses, but it doesn't protect “bad” teachers. Poor administrators allow poor teachers to continue teaching.

*Analysis:*

- Promotes a “teachers vs. administrators” view of the educational system.
- Sets up a legalistic mindset and argumentative tone.
- Repeats the negative.
- Doesn't address concerns about ineffective teachers or raise any hope for plausible solutions.
- Doesn't bring teachers' unions into the conversation productively.

*More Effective Response:*

The starting point for the discussion should be the practical steps we need to take to improve teacher quality and effectiveness. When we have good evaluation systems that also ensure due process for all school district employees, we have the best of both worlds. We need solutions that prepare

and support teachers as well as align teachers' work with what kids need to learn. In order to do this, we need to develop a network of resources or supports, much like the scaffolding builders use on a construction project, that allows teachers to be their best. The quality of this scaffolding is what allows teachers to be effective. Effective evaluation systems are just one part of this scaffolding that is needed to help teachers do their jobs well.

It is for this reason that the teachers' union has "rolled up its sleeves" to remodel the system, making the changes needed to reform tenure, including overhauling teacher evaluations, while looking to new ways to promote effectiveness. Let's build the scaffolding we need to help all teachers be their best and continue to be the brain builders we need them to be.

*Analysis:*

- Uses a value of Pragmatism to set a reasonable tone needed to introduce the positive role of teachers' unions in education reform efforts.
- Redirects thinking toward improving teacher effectiveness and away from "bad" teachers.
- Uses Scaffolding simplifying model to position teacher evaluation as one of the key supports for effective teachers.
- Uses Remodeling simplifying model to make reform seem practical.
- Opens up a space for teachers' unions and gets them on the right side of reform.

**Q: What about programs like *Teach for America*, which get motivated, enthusiastic young teachers into the schools that need them most?**

*Less Effective Response:*

Teach for America sounds good. In reality, it's taking the least prepared and least experienced teachers and placing them in the schools where kids need the very best and most experienced teachers. Parents would never send their children to doctors who got their license in a five-week summer course. In addition, while districts continue to hire Teach for America grads, they are laying off hundreds of more experienced, capable teachers because they cost more.

*Analysis:*

- Tone is defensive and rhetorical.
- Doesn't address the structural issues of the education system.

*More Effective Response:*

When we make investments in training temporary teachers for a limited time commitment, it's an inefficient use of resources and of the knowledge we've gained about what works to create effective teachers. We know that teachers gain a tremendous amount of experience and skills during their first two years of teaching, which they carry forward as they remain in the classroom. Rather than investing limited resources in short-term volunteers, we need to invest more in the training and retention of our permanent, long-term teaching workforce. In this way, we ensure the success of our students.

*Analysis:*

- Uses value of Pragmatism to set a reasonable tone for discussion.
- Focuses on structural issues and what teachers need to succeed.
- Doesn't directly criticize a program built on an appealing concept ("teachers just need to care") but nevertheless contests it.