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Do Teachers Support the Vergara Decision?

IN JUNE, A CALIFORNIA COURT RULED, in *Vergara v. State of California*, that the state's tenure and seniority laws are unconstitutional. Minority students have filed a similar case in New York, with more to come elsewhere.

The powerful California Teachers Association has appealed the judge's decision, and teachers unions across the country are arguing that teachers deserve job protection because principals rate almost all of them as effective. Their point is well taken. In October 2014, 94 percent of teachers in the State of New York were identified by school district officials as either effective or highly effective. (The percentage does not include New York City teachers, as no data are available for the district.)

But how do teachers rate their own colleagues when given a chance to do so anonymously?

An answer to that question is to be found in the eighth annual *Education Next* survey of public and teacher opinion discussed in this issue of the journal (see "No Common Opinion on the Common Core," *features*, Winter 2015).

Survey respondents were asked to state the percentage of teachers in their local school district they think deserve one of the five grades on the traditional A-to-F scale. To make sure respondents provided a consistent set of responses, the survey forced the five grading categories to add up to 100 percent before the respondent was able to move on to the next question.

Teachers awarded 69 percent of their colleagues in the local school district an A or B. But teacher enthusiasm for their co-workers does not extend to all of them. Teachers report that 8 percent of their colleagues deserve a D and 5 percent deserve an F.

Parents grade teachers more harshly. They give 56 percent of the teachers in the local schools one of the two top grades, and hand out a D to 11 percent and an F to 10 percent.

Union leaders could argue that the parents are blaming teachers for their own children's faults, but they may find

it difficult to explain away the fact that even teachers consider well over 10 percent of their colleagues to be woefully inadequate.

You can't have good schools without good teachers across the board, but improving the lowest-performing segment of teachers would go a long way in this regard. Good teachers are so important to student learning that if the lowest-performing 5 to 7 percent of all teachers were replaced with just average teachers, the long-term benefits to the nation's human capital would be enough to increase annual economic growth rates by as much as 1 percent annually, according to estimates from Stanford economist Eric Hanushek.

The public seems to agree that something needs to be done, and that is where tenure laws come in. Survey respondents favor ending tenure by a ratio of 2:1. By about the same ratio, the public also thinks that if tenure is awarded, it should be based in part on how well the teacher's students perform in the classroom.

Interestingly enough, a majority of teachers agree that change is needed. Only 41 percent of teachers both favor tenure and think that it should be unrelated to student performance.

Courts have yet to reach a final verdict on teacher tenure and seniority rights, but the court of public opinion has already made a clear determination.

Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
