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Standing up for teachers

By [Eugene Robinson](#), Published: September 17

Teachers are heroes, not villains, and it's time to stop demonizing them.

It has become fashionable to blame all of society's manifold sins and wickedness on "teachers unions," as if it were possible to separate these supposedly evil organizations from the dedicated public servants who belong to them. News flash: Collective bargaining is not the problem, and taking that right away from teachers will not fix the schools.

It is true that teachers in Chicago have dug in their heels against [Mayor Rahm Emanuel's demands](#) for "[reform](#)," some of which are not unreasonable. I'd dig in, too, if I were constantly being lectured by self-righteous crusaders whose knowledge of the inner-city schools crisis comes from a Hollywood movie.

The problems that afflict public education go far beyond what George W. Bush memorably called "the soft bigotry of low expectations." They go beyond whatever measure of institutional sclerosis may be attributed to tenure, beyond the inevitable cases of burnout, beyond the fact that teachers in some jurisdictions actually earn halfway decent salaries.

The fact is that teachers are being saddled with absurdly high expectations. Some studies have shown a correlation between student performance and teacher "effectiveness," depending how this elusive quality is measured. But there is a whole body of academic literature proving the stronger correlation between student performance and a much more important variable: family income.

Yes, I'm talking about poverty. Sorry to be so gauche, but when teachers point out the relationship between income and achievement, they're not shirking responsibility. They're just stating an inconvenient truth.

According to [figures compiled by the College Board](#), students from families making more than \$200,000 score more than 300 points higher on the SAT, on average, than students from families making less than \$20,000 a year. There is, in fact, a clear relationship all the way [along the scale](#): Each increment in higher family income translates into points on the test.

Sean Reardon of Stanford University's Center for Education Policy Analysis concluded in a recent [study](#) that the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students is actually widening. It is unclear why this might be happening; maybe it is due to increased income inequality, maybe the relationship between income and achievement has somehow become stronger, maybe there is some other reason.

Whatever the cause, our society's answer seems to be: Beat up the teachers.

The brie-and-chablis "reform" movement would have us believe that most of the teachers in low-income, low-performing schools are incompetent — and, by extension, that most of the teachers in upper-crust schools, where students perform well, are paragons of pedagogical virtue.

But some of the most dedicated and talented teachers I've ever met were working in "failing" inner-city schools. And yes, in award-winning schools where, as in Lake Wobegon, "all the children are above average," I've met some unimaginative hacks who should never be allowed near a classroom.

It is reasonable to hold teachers accountable for their performance. But it is not reasonable — or, in the end, productive — to hold them accountable for factors that lie far beyond their control. It is fair to insist that teachers approach their jobs with the assumption that every single child, rich or poor, can succeed. It is not fair to expect teachers to correct all the imbalances and remedy all the pathologies that result from growing inequality in our society.

You didn't see any of this reality in "[Waiting for 'Superman.'](#)" the 2010 documentary that argued we should "solve" the education crisis by establishing more charter schools and, of course, stomping the teachers unions. You won't see it later this month in "[Won't Back Down](#)," starring Viola Davis and Maggie Gyllenhaal, which argues for "parent trigger" laws designed to produce yet more charter schools and yet more teacher-bashing.

I've always considered myself an apostate from liberal orthodoxy on the subject of education. I have no fundamental objection to [charter schools](#), as long as they produce [results](#). I believe in the centrality and primacy of public education, but I believe it's immoral to tell parents, in effect, "Too bad for your kids, but we'll fix the schools someday."

But portraying teachers as villains doesn't help a single child. Ignoring the reasons for the education gap in this country is no way to close it. And there's a better way to learn about the crisis than going to the movies. Visit a school instead.

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