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Contact: Ty Eberhardt
(202) 223-5452

CAN TEACHERS AND REFORMERS GET ALONG?

AFT leader and conservative education expert search for common ground over reform.

WASHINGTON—Two of America’s leading voices on education met at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute’s Washington, D.C., office yesterday for a panel discussion, “[When Reform Touches Teachers](#),” agreeing broadly on the need for education reform, but diverging over specifics.

Teacher compensation, evaluation, and collective bargaining dominated the lively discussion between Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, and Frederick M. Hess, director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

As the head of the nation’s second-largest teacher union, the 1.5 million-member AFT, Weingarten has been at the center of national debate over the role of organized labor in education. Both Hess and Weingarten criticized the sometimes-heated tone of that debate, but divided over whether consensus was valuable.

“There’s no reason we should be able to sing kumbaya,” said Hess. “We should be able to disagree vigorously, but with respect for one another.” Weingarten agreed that disagreement is healthy, but she warned against divisiveness.

“At the ground level...you have to find common ground,” Weingarten said. “Because at the end of the day if you can’t find common ground, in terms of how you equip teachers with the tools and conditions to do their work, you’re going to have to do this alone. And the one thing we’ve learned, in terms of education, is no one can do this alone.”

The role of public-employee collective bargaining rights was a source of particular disagreement. Weingarten described collective bargaining as a way to affect “not just economic dignity, but to actually create voice to enable the tools and conditions that teachers need.” By contrast, Hess argued that collective bargaining had resulted in an unsustainable system of financing education. “School boards and superintendents in Wisconsin and elsewhere have made it clear they lack the intestinal fortitude to negotiate responsibly,” he said.

Hess and Weingarten agreed on the importance of adapting teacher evaluation, but split over specifics. Weingarten emphasized that teacher evaluation must be done “with teachers, not to teachers.” Still, “if people are not cutting it, they can’t be in the profession,” she said. “We want to deal with it fairly, but we have to deal with it.” Weingarten also voiced support for ending “Last In, First Out” layoff policies—at least once acceptable evaluation systems are in place. Such systems would “make Last In, First Out moot,” she said.

For further information about this event, including a complete webcast, and about the Fordham Institute, please visit us online at www.edexcellence.net.

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