

On Leaders and Teacher Responsibility

by P. L. Thomas, Furman University

Throughout the U.S., political leaders and candidates are rightfully concerned about asserting their credibility as leaders; however, when political leaders and candidates emphasize their leadership skills in the education reform debate, the implication appears to be that leadership replaces the value of expertise and experience in education.

Let me offer two representative examples focusing on candidates for superintendent of education and governor in South Carolina. Education reform in SC includes calls for linking teacher evaluations to student test scores, confronting the rising concerns about Common Core, and revisiting decades-long concerns about teacher pay and teacher interest in high-poverty areas of the state.

Current Superintendent Mick Zais, who will not seek re-election, has called for dropping historical commitments to teacher pay based on experience and level of education, preferring instead so-called merit-based metrics and incentives.

As a candidate for superintendent and a state representative supporting Zais's position on teacher pay and evaluation, [Rep. Andy Patrick, R-Hilton Head Island, SC, addressed](#) the upcoming race for state superintendent as that intersects with plans to change teacher evaluation in South Carolina: "You don't hire a surgeon to run a hospital," he said. "What I believe we need are leaders in education not beholden to a system that's not shown the results we need to see."

Concurrently, the race for governor in SC has focused on education, with current governor Nikki Haley making headlines with her highlighting public education (despite her strong association with school choice initiatives seen as antagonistic to public schools).

In the context of Haley's new positions, [Sen. Vincent Sheheen, D-Kershaw, SC, candidate for governor, responded](#) to concerns I expressed about his

focus on raising teacher pay as central to his education platform. My point was that numerous surveys shows that teachers would respond better to political support for better teaching conditions than to promises of raising pay again. Informed of this criticism, Sheheen countered:

I think teaching environment is critical, but the biggest message we need to send for our support of public education is that we value our teachers. Sometimes academics and researchers omit the important emotional content that goes into a successful system. That's what leaders are for.

A key aspect of Sheheen's response is that by criticizing me, and apparently the lack of credibility found among academics and researchers, Sheheen also belittled the importance of my 18 years in the public school classroom.

While I concede that leadership is important and that we can identify and foster leadership skills, emphasized by both Patrick and Sheheen, I reject the implication of these comments because they suggest that leadership skills *replace* the need for expertise and experience. I contend that leadership *grows* from expertise and experience ([Patrick's background](#) includes the military and politics; [Sheheen's background](#) includes law and politics as well as his parents working in education). Patrick and Sheheen represent that misguided policy support often grows from leadership absent the presence of expertise and experience in the field being addressed.

Political leadership, historically and currently, then, has contributed directly to the marginalization of teacher professionalism, voice, and autonomy. In fact, the conditions surrounding [becoming and being a teacher](#) in 2014 are reflected in Lou LaBrant's "[The Rights and Responsibilities of the Teacher of English](#)" from 1961 [1]. LaBrant begins by identifying the conditions of teaching during her career, replicated today in political and public attacks on teachers unions and the increased accountability measures such as Common Core, new high-stakes testing, value-added methods of teacher evaluation, and merit pay:

Every teacher of English exercises some rights, no matter how dictatorial the system under which he works; and every teacher carries out some responsibilities. But today we have a considerable

movement in this country to curtail certain freedom—rights—of the classroom teacher, and those rights are the matter of this discussion. (p. 379)

Reducing teaching to its mechanical parts, according to LaBrant, strips teachers of their professional “freedom,” autonomy:

Teaching, unlike the making of a car, is primarily a thought process. A man may work on an assembly line, turning a special kind of bolt day after day, and succeed as a bolt-turner....But the teacher is something quite different from the man who turns a bolt, because the student is not like a car. Teaching is a matter of changing the mind of the student, of using that magic by which the thinking of one so bears on the thinking of another that new understanding and new mental activity begin. Obviously, the degree to which this is reduced to a mechanical procedure affects the results....

But we cannot expect a teacher to continue the attempt to find better means or to invent new approaches unless he knows he will have freedom to use his results. Without this freedom we must expect either a static teacher or a frustrated one. I have seen both: the dull, hopeless, discouraged teacher, and the angry, blocked, unhappy individual. (p. 380)

Predating [Adam Bessie's refuting the "bad teacher" myth](#), LaBrant connects the “dictatorial” educational system with the implication that since some teachers are often “bad,” all teachers need control:

Repeatedly when capable teachers ask for freedom, someone points out that we have many lazy teachers, stupid teachers unable to think and choose, ignorant teachers; in short, bad teachers who need control. We do have some, but we encourage others to be bad. Even the weak teacher does better when he has to face his own decisions, and when he supports that decision. The best way to induce teachers to think and act is to put them into situations where some thinking is essential. This less competent teacher will put more effort into the work he has himself undertaken than he will into something handed out to him. Moreover, he can, if he proves helpless, be given direction. The right to select does not force everyone to use all of his freedom,

but it encourages him to use his mind. The nature of human beings precludes for either teacher or class a totally static course. The exercise of freedom is itself one means by which we become good teachers. (p. 383)

A powerful point presented by LaBrant, one too often unspoken today by teacher advocates, is the need for teachers to “earn” that freedom as they also call for their autonomy; it is in effect an argument for teacher professionalism grounded in the evidence of the field:

One reason so many of us do not have our rights is that we have not earned them. The teacher who is free to decide when and how to teach language structure has an obligation to master his grammar, to analyze the problems of writing, and to study their relations to structure....But his right to choose comes only when he has read and considered methods other than his own. He has no right to choose methods or materials which research has proved ineffective....There is little point in asking for a right without preparation for its use. (p. 390)

Finally, LaBrant challenges the pursuit of “uniformity,” today’s standardization, and ends with her strong support for teacher autonomy:

Throughout our country today we have great pressure to improve our schools. By far too much of that pressure tends toward a uniformity, a conformity, a lock-step which precludes the very excellence we claim to desire.

However, LaBrant tempers her call for autonomy by also raising expectations for teachers:

There is little consideration of the teacher as a catalyst, a changing, growing personality. Only a teacher who thinks about his work can think in class; only a thinking teacher can stimulate as they should be stimulated the minds with which he works. Freedom of any sort is a precious thing; but freedom to be our best, in the sense of our highest, is not only our right but our moral responsibility. “They”—the public, the administrators, the critics—have no right to take freedom from us, the teachers; but freedom is not something one wins and then

possesses; freedom is something we rein every day, as much a quality of ourselves as it is a concession from others. (pp. 390-391)

In the five-plus decades since LaBrant wrote this piece, little has changed, including the lack of expertise and experience in education among political leaders.

To continue championing leadership that replaces that expertise and experience is to continue to strip teachers of the very professionalism that those leaders often give lip service to with token calls for higher pay and misleading claims that teachers are the most important element in the education of students. To argue that teacher quality is central to student success (both a valid claim and a misleading one since [teacher quality accounts for only 10-15% of measurable student achievement](#), the metric these leaders want to use to evaluate and pay teachers) or that we need to pay teachers more rings hypocritical beside stump speeches stating directly that educational leaders do not need experience or expertise in education.

Leadership grows from expertise and experience; our true leaders in education walk the halls of our schools, teach every day, and yet, remain essentially ignored by those who wish to prove that their leadership skills trump all.

[1] For more work by LaBrant see [Lou LaBrant: An Annotated Bibliography](#).



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