

## Why Politician's Should Worry about Teacher's Unions

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In Argentina, many good teachers earn wages that do not conform to their dedication in one of the most important jobs in our society; but there are also others, who earn wages they do not deserve.

It is clear that for the union leaders this issue is irrelevant, evidence of this was the position of the Frente Gremial Bonaerense during the last salary negotiations of the sector: "We believe that no teacher may earn less than 7,000 pesos, and also that a salary scale according to seniority and hierarchical position should be established". Seniority and not merit, a true cancer faced by education in Argentina.

Last February 14th *The Economist* published an interesting article that highlights the cost of not confronting teachers' unions.

Imagine a job where effort and dedication have no chances to be reflected in better pay or promotion opportunities, and neglect or incompetence do not increase the risk of getting fired. The pay is low, but at least the holidays are long. Who is expected to be attracted by this type of activity? Highly qualified and motivated professionals or those who are just interested in fulfilling a schedule to receive their pay check? The answer is obvious.

To change this reality it is necessary to remove the advantages that attract the incompetent, such as job security and a salary scale based on seniority, and to encourage the many teachers that are dedicated, motivated and qualified, with a salary scale based on the excellence of their work, not on their seniority.

But as it is pointed out in the note of *The Economist*: "Teachers' unions are found, almost everywhere, confronting any reforms. Their willingness to support bad professionals instead of the many good and motivated ones should not be underestimated". For example, some time ago, in Washington DC teachers were offered a considerable raise of salary in exchange for less job security. As is to be expected the teachers' union strongly opposed the reform.

Teachers' unions maximize the number of members regardless of their quality. The incentives of the union leaders are neither consistent with the interests of the good teachers nor of the students.

Teachers' quality matters a lot; this is highlighted in a joint study by the World Bank and seven countries of Latin America and the Caribbean: Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru and the Dominican Republic. This work is possibly the most extensive carried out concerning the role of teachers, with more than 15.0000 unexpected visits to classrooms of 3,000 public schools between 2009 and 2013.

In allusion to this study, on July 26, 2014 *The Economist* pointed out that "the main reason for Latin America's educational failure is simple. The region churns out large numbers of teachers recruited from poorly qualified candidates. It trains them badly and pays them peanuts (between 10% and 50% less than other professionals). So they teach badly".

Compare this picture with a teacher in Finland who earns a living wage, similar to any other university graduate, and is socially highly respected. The differences in the requirements are homologous to the distance between Finland and Latin America. Being a teacher in Finland takes three years of College and two years of a Master Degree. To be admitted in College it is required a grade point average in high school of at least nine points, and also passing a rigorous selection process; only 10% of the applicants will be admitted.

Which of the two pictures is more appropriate to describe a teacher in Argentina? The answer is obvious again.

The importance of the role of the teachers is the foundation of the historic ruling issued in June 2014 by the California Judge Rolf Treu in the case Vergara vs. California, which states that students have the constitutional right for equal access to quality education and that the Permanent Employment Statute of the State violates those rights. According to the ruling, the provisions of the Statute giving teachers job security, make it almost impossible to fire underperforming teachers, which deprives students from a quality education and therefore violates their constitutional rights.

The case was presented by Students Matter, an ONG funded by a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and other philanthropists, on behalf of nine public school students. It was sponsored by two world-class lawyers, who presented research results showing the negative impact of low quality teachers on student achievement.

Marcellus McRae, one of the attorneys, said that “this case does not seek a new law that would prejudice the rights of teachers, but to eliminate the barriers that school administrators have to fire inefficient teachers”.

The decision of this case spurred further litigation in other States. It is clear that in US the pressure of civil society is leading to change the status quo in education through the courts, given the inaction of politicians.

And what can we say about the issue in our country? Has someone heard a politician remark on possible costs for the students associated with teachers’ labor stability or with the existence of a wage scale based on seniority instead of merit? Of course not. No politician wants to confront the teachers’ unions.

Education in our country requires a reform of a magnitude similar to that generated by Sarmiento, more than a century ago. We need a statesman, a fanatic of education for fellow citizens. We do need a politician who dares to confront teachers’ unions rather than negotiate with them.