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# Democracy & Education

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## Talking Back to Corporate Reform

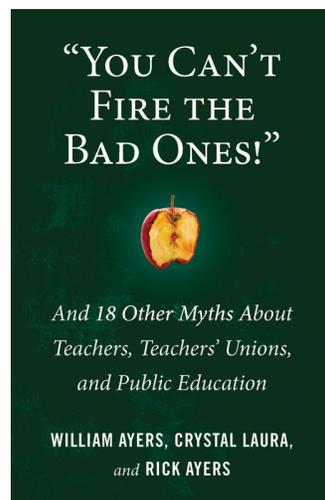
A Book Review of *“You Can’t Fire the Bad Ones!” And 18 Other Myths About Teachers, Teachers’ Unions, and Public Education*

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I TEACH AN INTRODUCTORY education course at a small liberal arts college. Some of my students are planning to be teachers, but most are taking it as an elective or to satisfy a general education requirement. In the class sequence that addresses how we prepare teachers and what makes a “good teacher,” inevitably the issue of tenure comes up and someone remarks, “The problem is tenure—as soon as they have it, teachers give up working hard, and then schools are stuck with them.” I am continuously surprised by these remarks, especially given the demographic of my classes—these are mostly students who have been relatively well served in schools and report having mostly “good” teachers. Furthermore, they know little about what tenure is and how it works in the K–12 education system. I have concluded that it is not direct personal experience that gives them this shared belief that tenure is evil; my usually sharp, critical-thinking students are parroting what they have seen in the media, in popular culture, and through images that permeate our national imagination: tenure protects bad teachers and is the root of problems in our education system. It’s no surprise that my students are against teacher tenure—they are mostly in their early 20s and grew up in the era of standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, and the American pastime of teacher bashing. The ineffective tenured teacher is as much a cultural trope as Barney the big purple dinosaur from their childhoods.



The popular refrain “you can’t fire the bad ones” is the title of a book by scholars/activists Bill Ayers, Crystal Laura, and Rick Ayers. Published this year by Beacon Press, the book confronts 19 myths that are ingrained in public sentiment about our American education system. These myths aim to discredit public education and cast doubt on such things as teacher tenure, unions, and teacher education. *“You Can’t Fire the Bad Ones!”* provides an antidote to these pernicious attacks on public

education; problems in education are not caused by unions and bad teachers, the book argues, but by a lack of investment in public schools.

In the opening chapter, “Rotten Apples,” the authors (2018) set context and clarify purpose. The chapter’s title is a reference to the 2014 *Times* magazine cover<sup>1</sup> depicting a gavel about to smash an apple with the caption: “It is nearly impossible to fire a bad teacher.

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1 See *Time* magazine, November 3, 2014, <http://time.com/3533615/in-the-latest-issue-11/>.

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Some tech millionaires may have figured out how to change that.” The chapter documents several media campaigns that malign teachers and their unions by framing unions as status quo protecting bureaucrats that block reforms and harm students by protecting “bad teachers.” The authors argued that these campaigns create a narrative about public education that diverts attention away from real social issues that plague our public systems. Touted by politicians and corporate reformers, this narrative frames “the problem” in education in such a way that market-based reforms such as charter schools, vouchers, and alternative certification for teachers become the only plausible solutions for fixing our broken system.

The book is divided into 19 myths covering a range of topics that have been at the center of reform debates for decades. For example, the merits of standardized testing and high-stakes accountability reform are debunked in myth six, “High Stakes Standardized Tests Improve Student Achievement and Effectively Detect Inferior Teachers,” and in myth eight, “Teachers Are Made More Visible and Accountable in Charter Schools,” the promise of charter schools to weed out bad teachers is challenged. While topics range in focus, they are held together by the common theme of market-driven reform and the effort to privatize and deregulate public education. This, the authors argued, is the goal of corporate reformers.

While all of the myths addressed in the book are pertinent to current reforms and reflect efforts to erode public trust in education, the chapters related to unions and tenure stand out as particularly well argued. The authors (2018) skillfully deconstructed the myth that unions and tenure protect bad teachers and, as a result, harm student achievement. If unions were the cause of low student achievement, they argued, we would expect higher achievement levels in states where collective bargaining is prohibited and lower achievement in states with strong unions. However, quite the opposite is true. Nine out of the ten states with the highest NAEP scores<sup>2</sup> also have high union participation, while “right to work” states (i.e., states without collective bargaining) rank at the bottom in national comparisons. In addition to debunking the argument that unions protect bad teaching, the chapters also provide a historical review of teacher unionism, demonstrating how teachers’ unions originated in the fight for gender parity and how unions have historically advocated for greater equity and public investment in education. Finally, by deconstructing union myths, the authors flipped the script on the root problems of low achievement. It is not a coincidence, the authors argued, that higher-achieving states invest more in per-pupil funding compared to lower achieving states. Unions protect and promote public education—they don’t harm it.

The book also does an excellent job tackling the issue of teacher preparation. As a university-based teacher educator and a scholar of the teacher workforce, I am particularly interested in

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2 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) is the most comprehensive national comparison in the United States and is commonly used to compare student achievement across states.

myth nine, “Anyone Can Teach,” and myth fourteen, “Teachers Are Poorly Served by Universally Dreadful Teacher Education.” These chapters challenge dominant discourses that support alternative certification and fast-track programs such as Teach for America that put underprepared teachers in classrooms serving our most vulnerable student populations. The authors (2018) interrogate the framing of teachers as content experts and teaching as the technical transmission of knowledge, offering instead a view of teaching as complex, intellectual, and focused on the diverse needs of students. Preparing teachers for this work is similarly complex. The chapter correlates the unwarranted attacks on teacher education and the recent decline in admissions (down 53% from 10 years ago), highlighting the tangible harm these myths cause to public education.

While the purpose of “*You Can’t Fire the Bad Ones!*” is to challenge popular myths and make visible their faulty logic, its value is much more inspiring and far-reaching. Ayers, Laura, and Ayers (2018) are, above all, fierce advocates for our public system of education. The reality checks in each chapter do much more than reveal the flaws in the myths they address; they also renew readers’ faith in the institution of public education and direct our attention to where we should be advocating for more public involvement.

While these myths have been shaping public opinion for the past two decades, “*You Can’t Fire the Bad Ones!*” (2018) is timely and relevant. Since the book was published in January, thousands of teachers have gone on strike, resulting in states meeting demands for higher pay, increased investments in education spending, and limited expansion of charter schools. Social media has been saturated by Arizona teachers posting videos on their way to second and third jobs and documenting the horrific state of their schools, classrooms, and teaching materials. Teachers in Colorado launched the state’s first strike in 24 years, and two weeks later, 15,000 teachers in North Carolina joined the ranks of #red4ed, demanding greater state commitment in education. More remarkable, the public has shown strong support for striking teachers. Recent reports estimate that most people, across party lines, don’t think teachers are paid enough and are willing to increase taxes to pay teachers more (Campbell, 2018; Kamenetz, 2018). Perhaps this is a turning point for public education. If that’s the case, and the public is reclaiming the education system, we will all need to talk back to union-bashers and corporate reformers. “*You Can’t Fire the Bad Ones!*” provides the ammunition to do just that.

## References

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