

Why Are People So Gullible About Miracle Cures in Education?

Diane Ravitch

Dear Deborah,

Teacher-bashing has become the motif of the day. It is usually cloaked in some high-minded rhetoric that pretends to praise teachers. Say the bashers: We need great teachers; great teachers can solve all our problems; great teachers can close the achievement gap; if you don't have great teachers, you are doomed; blah, blah, blah. What they really mean—read between the lines—is that they think most of the teachers we now have are no good. We have to start firing the stragglers, the ones whose kids don't get high test scores. The theory is that—emulating Jack Welch at GE—we should fire the bottom 10 percent every year, and over time we will have a staff of "great" teachers because all the bums will be gone.

Recently, I attended a conference where a well-known scholar actually proposed this as the way school systems should function. Just keep firing the "weak" and replacing them with newbies. That way, the teaching force will get continually better.

Part of the reasoning is founded on the belief that recent graduates of the Ivy League colleges (aka the best and the brightest) will fill the ranks of the teaching corps and recruitment of "great" teachers will not be a problem. I am still trying to understand the math. Teach for America brings in 5,000 or so teachers a year; there are 3 million teachers in America. I don't believe that Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, and Berkeley will ever supply enough teachers to fill the need for new teachers. Nor am I persuaded that someone will definitely be a great teacher just because he or she graduated from a highly selective college. I know people, as I am sure you do, who are utterly brilliant, highly educated, with degrees from the best colleges, who were failures in the classroom. And I know superb teachers who graduated from state universities.

The quest for the mythical great teacher—the one we must stalk like some rare beast of unsurpassed beauty—is tinged with contempt for the large majority of teachers who did not go to Princeton or Swarthmore or Harvard. I habitually read news articles online about what is happening across the nation in education, and I frequently read the comments. Whenever there is an article about teachers, it is often followed by a series of comments that express rage toward teachers. "She got what she deserved." "These lazy teachers, they teach only 10 months a year, and they have the nerve to complain." "No wonder our kids are failing when we have teachers like that!" "Why should they get a raise, they have an easy job." On and on the complaints go. I have tried to figure out where all this anger toward teachers comes from. I just don't get it.

One other thing: You mention the hype and spin that we often see in the media. It seems that many journalists won't write about education unless they can find a miracle to write about. So they find a teacher or a school where kids who were completely indifferent to learning were suddenly transformed by the inspiration of one teacher or one school. A classroom full of sullen thugs turns into mathematical geniuses or poets. When people see this narrative again and again, they must wonder why every teacher is not performing similar miracles. After all, they went to the movies and they saw an existence proof. And, as many of our illustrious peers often say, "If it can happen in one school, it can happen in all schools."

As long as we expect schools to perform miracles, we will continue to be bitterly disappointed. Perhaps it is this phony expectation that has created so much anger and frustration among the public. Surely they wonder why all teachers can't be like Jaime Escalante or any of a dozen other miracle-workers.

I was struck, too, by your mention of the journalists who see a miracle where there was none at all. Geoffrey Canada's school, [as described by Paul Tough](#), is one such. It really was a story of Canada abandoning the kids who started at his charter school because they couldn't get the scores he wanted. So out they went. No miracle there!

Or another miracle was reported in *The New York Times* a couple of weeks ago. It seems someone administered a test (I think it was the Graduate Record Exam) before and after the presidential election to a group of African American adults. Before the election, there was the usual achievement gap between the races; after the race, the gap closed. I had an extended email exchange with a friend about this "study." He wanted to believe that it was true. I finally gave in and said, "Yes, yes, we can stop worrying about the achievement gap. Now that Obama has been elected, everyone will read at grade level, none below. I can't wait to see the results of the next state tests. We can all stop worrying now. The kids who couldn't read last year will now be proficient."

The great mystery is why so many people are so gullible about miracle cures when it comes to education. They certainly don't expect miracles in any other part of their life. But the schools just can't seem to shake this belief that all children will learn to the highest standards when: 1) all teachers are great teachers; 2) every school has a brilliant leader as principal; 3) every superintendent has an M.B.A.; 4) every school is run by entrepreneurs; 5) every school is organized around a theme; 6) every school is small; 7) all schools are charters. I know that multiple-choice questions are supposed to have only four answers. In this case, I could have added another 10 or 20.

Diane