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Save Our Schools

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Teacher Interview: Analysis and Comparison

Education reform is a complicated problem in the United States as some proposals, such as No Child Left Behind, seem to be strong ideas for reform only to fail in execution and other proposals, such as Race to the Top, have sections that are untested or have little data behind them. As standards change and standardized tests continue, more pressure is placed onto the classroom teachers. Teachers hold the most accountability and may be rewarded (merit pay) or punished (lose their job) depending on their students’ performances on tests and their levels of improvement in the classroom. With so much pressure on teachers to ensure high performances from their students, asking a teacher about these issues would be very effective in learning about their impact on schools, students, and teachers.

Karen Christopfel is a 9th and 10th grade English teacher at James N. Gamble Montessori High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. She previously taught English at Hughes High School and transferred to Gamble Montessori just this year. I worked with her last year at Hughes in orchestrating a talent show; at the time, I had not thought to ask her about any of the pressing education reform matters. I interviewed her in her classroom, as students ran through the hallways (and even had to pause the interview as she stopped some students and brought them back to their respective classrooms). She was very simple and direct in her answers to my questions. Through talking to her, I learned more about her thoughts on old, new, and suggested education policies and one thing she believes has the most impact on education[[1]](#footnote-1).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is a controversial education reform policy that sets an impossible standard for all schools to reach. Author Diane Ravitch writes in her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, “No one truly expects all students will be proficient by 2014” and refers to the standard as “impossible” (103). Christopfel feels that the theory behind NCLB is good, but also hold teachers accountable for aspects (especially poverty) of students’ lives that over which they have no control. A student’s performance on a test is not completely determined by their experiences in the classroom, yet teachers can potentially be fired for students’ low-performances on tests and schools can be closed. The NCLB law assumes that its remedies would cause better performance in all schools, yet “…There is no substantial body of evidence that demonstrates that low-performing schools can be turned around by any of the remedies of the law” (Ravitch 104). Christopfel also mentioned that the implementation and span of NCLB are ineffective, matching with the lack of significant improvement in test scores and in proficiency after the installation of NCLB (Ravitch).

NCLB sets not only an impossible proficiency expectancy and has an overall ineffectiveness, but also increases the usage and importance of standardized testing in the classroom. Christopfel believes that standardized tests are helpful in moderation and when the tests are used to help teachers gauge if their students understand the material; however, Christopfel does not agree with how the tests are being used as a punishment. By taking the tests from being a form of assessment to being a determination of whether or not teachers should be fired and schools should be closed, Christopfel feels that the tests hinder teachers and students in the classroom. Often these test scores are the only information needed for a school to be declared “low-performing,” with the assumption being that the scores accurately portray the level of learning and education for each student and, overall, at the school. As Ravitch summarizes, “[NCLB] assumed that higher test scores on standardized tests of basic skills are synonymous with good education…Good education cannot be achieved by a strategy of testing children, shaming educators, and closing schools” (111), and Christopfel agrees. Tests should not be punishments, but rather assessments that can aid teachers in improving their teachings.

With the continued thought that unmotivated or lazy teachers are solely to blame for students performing badly on standardized tests, many education policy makers suggest using merit or performance pay, which is the act of giving a teacher a monetary bonus to her salary if her students to do well on the tests or giving the school additional money for higher performance. Christopfel addresses many concerns that other education reformers have, including that performance pay may lead to decrease in teachers wanting to teach in urban school with low performance. Christopfel also feels that merit pay may potentially punish those choosing not to work in high-performing schools. Interestingly, one study shows that merit pay may actually cause a decrease in performance, noting, “Researchers were… surprised to find that middle school students actually seemed to be worse off. After three years attending schools involved in the [merit pay] project, middle school students’ math and English test scores declined by a statistically significant amount compared to students attending similar schools that were not part of the project” (Green “Study”). Another study found that “On the whole, researchers found no significant difference between the test results from classes led by teachers eligible for bonuses and those led by teachers who were ineligible” (Anderson “Teacher Bonuses”), meaning that merit pay may not be as effective or as detrimental as some people think it might be.

Teacher evaluations are another suggested aspect to education that would cause better reform. Christopfel thinks teacher evaluations, like standardized tests, would be best in moderation. Many schools, like Gamble Montessori, use improvement scores in evaluating the teachers. As Christopfel mentions, students and schools with already high performance may have little improvement and, as such, may be punished for little to no increase in their general improvement score. However, she does like that teacher evaluations could prevent teacher unions from protecting bad teachers and allowing them to continue teaching. Teacher evaluations would be hard to keep objective and fair, as so much about teaching involves everyday classroom experiences that cannot be expressed in few days of observation or in seeing improvement scores.

Everything that happens in the classroom is not the only influence on students; a student cannot be separated from his or her environment outside of school. When I asked Christopfel what she thought was one thing that could be changed to improve schools, she responded simply: poverty. I was shocked she answered so quickly and with that. Not once did changing poverty come into my mind when I thought about how I would personally change the education system. However, after her answer, I began to realize how much poverty and wealth play into the education system. Generally, the wealthier a family is, the more educated the members of that family are. With more money, comes the ability for one parent not to work and stay home with the children. Parental interaction and instruction is crucial to the beginnings of education for children. In poorer families, many times the parents are working all day and night and cannot afford to take to the time to help children with homework or studying. Christopfel’s answer truly seems to be the most logical and, at the same, most difficult solution to education reform.

In reading Alfie Kohn’s article “Poor Teaching for Poor Children…in the Name of Reform,” I discovered more about the teaching method used in poorer districts and schools. While students in wealthier schools and areas are encouraged in critical thinking and forming an opinion, students in lower income areas are taught obedience and how to behave properly, as Kohn states, “Schools for the well-off are about inquiry and choices; schools for the poor are about drills and compliance.” Poverty even explains the published report “A Nation at Risk, “ which led to numerous educational reform proposals, and other studies that show that U.S. students are behind other countries’ students in education: “If you look closely at those international test comparisons that supposedly find the U.S. trailing, it turns out that socioeconomic factors are largely responsible.  Our wealthier students do very well compared to other countries; our poorer students do not.  And we have more poor children than do other industrialized nations” (Kohn). Poverty truly appears to be the ultimate decider of success in schools, in high performance on standardized tests, and the quality of education.

Interviewing Ms. Christopfel was wonderful and informative. Her answers on other topics (such as getting parents involved, teacher consultation before hiring a new teacher, and school board members) helped me form a better understanding of a teacher’s point of view on topics she can personally influence and control. I especially admired how straight forward her answers were; she answered honestly and concisely. I discovered that she did not know much about Race to the Top, even though it had the potential to affect her teaching. Her points about getting the parents involved in the classroom were greatly noted by me, as I someday will be teaching in a classroom and know the importance of having a good relationship with my students’ parents.

Her final answer about poverty shifted my entire view on education. Even though I knew that the environment outside of school has as much impact on students as the environment inside of school, I had never really thought about how poverty could drastically change both environments. Teaching methods are just as influenced by poverty as the students are; standardized test taking abilities are impacted by poverty. Education reform cannot change poverty, but changing poverty (or political and educational response to it) could greatly change education for the better.

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Interview with Karen Christopfel

1. **What are your general thoughts on No Child Left Behind?**

* I think the theory behind it is good, about not leaving children behind, having standards, and holding teachers and other people accountable. I think it holds teachers accountable for things we don’t have control over a lot of times because we know poverty is a big factor is a child’s preparation for school. If children aren’t prepared for school within the first six months of first grade, they’re already two years behind. It’s very difficult for kids to catch up. Those sorts of things we have no control over, and No Child Left Behind wants us to have control over them. But we don’t. So I think it is good in theory, but the implementation and the span of it are not effective.

1. **How do you feel about Race to the Top?**

* I don’t really know much about it. I think that we got money for Race to Top, but I don’t know very much about it. I know that is kind of a competition between schools, where schools have to apply for these grants.

1. **Do standardized tests help or hinder both students and teachers?**

* I think in moderation they can help students and teachers. If teachers are following the standards and teaching in the order that they are supposed to at any given time, it can be helpful to see if students are understanding it. What I don’t like is that it has gone from just an assessment to a punishment, where students, schools, and teachers are punished if students don’t pass these tests. It goes beyond being helpful. The nature that we use standardized tests does hinder students and teachers.

1. **How do you feel about teacher evaluations?**

* All these questions are in moderation. I think teachers should be evaluated. What I don’t like about unions is that they often allow poor teachers to continue and they are protected, which I don’t agree with. I think teacher evaluations are a good thing, but I know our teacher evaluation use test scores. It’s about improvement, so not so much if they passed. If your students don’t improve, you’re fired. And I don’t if that’s a bad thing. I haven’t decided yet. Higher students don’t improve as much because they are already at the top, but the evaluations are about improvement. If the top can’t improve, they can be seen as failing.

1. **How do you feel about performance/merit pay?**

* I think that’s difficult too because I fear teachers won’t want to teach at urban schools with low performance because they’ll be afraid that they’ll be fired if their students don’t improve. That they won’t get a raise. And all the teachers will want to go to suburban or the better performing schools. It’s going to leave a lot of schools without teachers because they’re afraid to teach there, not because of the kids. And, so, I disagree with it. I think it’s great in theory, but the kids that always do well will continue to do well. Those teachers will continue to do well. And those of us choosing to work with different students will be punished.

1. **How do you feel about school board members who have no background in education?**

* I think they have no place on the school board. It’s like a Phd student who has never taught. There are a lot of them at UC. It’s very irritating. To be a doctor of education without teaching. I don’t know how you can determine teachers. A business background does help because education is a business. But you have never taught then you have no idea what’s happening in the classroom. You can’t tell someone how to do something without having been there yourself.

1. **Do you think that teachers should be consulted before a new teacher is hired?**

* Typically we are in on the interview. If we’re hiring an English teacher, at least one representative from that department will be there. I don’t think every single in a department should be consulted. It would depend on the person they are interviewing and their professional discretion and the principal. Not necessarily.

1. **What are your thoughts on national CORE standards v. just state standards?**

* They’re pretty similar for English. I don’t know about other content areas. But for English they are pretty similar; there’s actually fewer standards now. There are fewer of them and they’re more specific, and I don’t see anything wrong with it. And I don’t see anything wrong with standards, with having things that have to be taught.

1. **How do you get parents involved in the classroom?**

* You have to call parents before children do something negative to get parent’s on board early. With just introductory phone calls and telling them how their child is doing. If your first phone call is a negative one, then it can make it difficult. I call every parent all the time, but that’s how you really kind of get them involved. Tell them they can come in anytime they want. Invite them to things that you are doing in the classroom. Some parents can’t; they’re working a lot. Parents don’t want to because they feel uncomfortable because they didn’t like school themselves. And so it’s tricky, so you have to make it a partnership and talk to them as much as possible. Have them understand that.

1. **What is one thing that can be changed to improve schools?**

- Poverty. That’s that. That’s the thing that could improve schools.

1. For the entire interview, see the additional pages after the work cited [↑](#footnote-ref-1)