

SCHOOLYARD BRAWL

A leading reformer and a union head square off over teacher tenure.

BY EVAN THOMAS AND PAT WINGERT
ILLUSTRATIONS BY PHIL LUBLINER

LAST SUMMER WE ASKED RANDI Weingarten, the head of the 1.4 million-member American Federation of Teachers, the second-largest teachers' union in America, to put a number on the percentage of incompetent teachers in New York, where approximately 0.01 percent are fired for cause every year. Weingarten wouldn't say. Pressed, she responded "up to 2 percent." When we repeated Weingarten's estimate to Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the District of Columbia school system, she laughed derisively. Rhee, an outspoken woman who has been trying to watch her words lately, wouldn't offer her own estimate, but it is safe to say that she believes 2 percent is a ridiculously low estimate of the percentage of incompetent teachers in any inner-city school system.

Weingarten and Rhee are the two principal actors on the most important stage in the ongoing drama of school reform in America. Almost three years ago, Rhee was brought in to fix what was arguably the worst school system in America. The public schools in the nation's capital were notorious for high costs and low performance. Rhee has taken direct aim at the holy grail of

the teachers' union: the common practice of giving public-school teachers lifetime tenure under rules that make firing a teacher, no matter how incompetent, very difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Rhee attempted to abolish tenure in exchange for offering merit pay—teachers who agreed to be judged by their performance could make up to \$130,000 a year. But Rhee's offer was never even put to a vote by the union. Rhee ran directly into Weingarten, whose union represents the bulk of teachers in big cities across America.

Weingarten, a media-savvy and clever lawyer, can see that the days are fast ending when the teachers' union can count on the support of the Democratic Party and the passivity of the education establishment to protect teachers with near impunity. But she is putting up a spirited rear-guard action to preserve the long-established job security of her union members. The two women have been locked in negotiations for a new union contract in D.C. for more than two years. The battle is being closely watched at the White House, where President Obama has backed his reform-minded education secretary, Arne Duncan, and by

school administrators and politicians all over the country. Rhee has a chance to set a strong example for weeding out incompetent teachers—if she doesn't overplay her hand against Weingarten, who is a formidable foe. "You have two strong-willed and very smart and determined women with very different agendas," says Chester Finn Jr., a former assistant secretary of education and a senior fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. "It has an almost gladiatorial aspect to it."

Aside from graduating from Cornell, the two have little in common. During several long and short interviews with *NEWSWEEK* over the past year, Weingarten spoke in big, round, high-flown sentences, and then artfully changed the subject or lapsed into jargon when challenged with uncomfortable facts. In private negotiations, she is known for letting loose with fits of temper, real or contrived. In public or private, Rhee, whom we also spoke to several times, is direct and blunt to the point of rudeness. In negotiations, she is known for staying cool—or cold—though her eyes burn and bore in. Rhee and Weingarten, who first tangled about five years ago when Wein-

1983-87

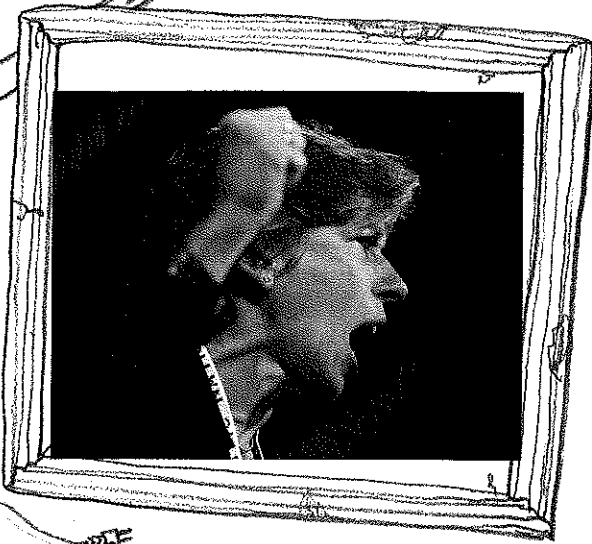
The 1983 report "A Nation at Risk" shows underqualified, underpaid teachers working in difficult conditions and achieving poor results. A 1986 follow-up calls for new standards; by 1987 a national teacher-certification board is up and running.

1992

Prof. Eric Hanushek publishes the first authoritative assessment of how much "value" teachers add to student achievement; others soon follow.

1990

Wendy Kopp's Teach for America begins enlisting top college students to work in low-income communities.



VS

Weingarten is insisting on protections for her 1.4 million members.

Rhee wants to pay teachers more—but wants to get rid of tenure.

garten was running the New York City teachers' union and Rhee was testifying against her as the head of a nonprofit organization promoting school reform, clearly dislike each other.

In 2008 Weingarten addressed a meeting of the NewSchools Venture Fund, a group formed to encourage charter schools and dominated by educational entrepreneurs and philanthropists who are generally hostile to the teachers' unions. It was a difficult setting for Weingarten, who deserved credit for showing up at all. After Weingarten attacked Rhee's research on displaced teachers, Rhee stood up in the audience and began accusing Weingarten of twisting her data. Clearly seething, Weingarten snapped back, "Michelle, you're absolutely wrong." The audience at the conference, normally a tepid affair, seemed shocked, and the moderator interjected, "Everybody keep your hands up—protect yourself for a few more minutes."

Weingarten has been on the defensive lately, fending off hostile questions on *Morning Joe* and other TV shows, which have begun to zero in on the difficulty of getting rid of poor teachers in the public schools. The cruelest blow was struck late last summer by *The New Yorker* in a widely read article by Steven Brill titled "The Rubber Room." It described, in vivid and sometimes ludicrous detail, how New York City teachers charged with misconduct or incompetence kill time outside the classroom in the "rubber room"—on full pay—while union lawyers and administrators wrangle and dither over firing them. The article quoted a New York public-school principal as saying that union boss Weingarten "would protect a dead body in the classroom."

To NEWSWEEK, Weingarten insisted, "That article had no impact on me." She went on, "I have always seen myself as a school reformer." Weingarten is more

receptive to change than the larger and more stolid National Education Association, which has resisted any attempts at teacher accountability that might threaten tenure. Eager to establish her reform bona fides with the think-tank world, she has set up a couple of charter schools in New York, using union teachers but with fewer work rules. "I think she wants to be part of the solution," says Steve Barr, founder of Green Dot Public Schools and Weingarten's partner in one of her charter ventures.

Well dressed and well educated, Weingarten is generally at ease among the chattering classes. She has been seen having coffee with Caroline Kennedy, and last month, at a fancy party full of Washington press insiders, Al Hunt of Bloomberg News threw his arms around her and exclaimed with a laugh, "My favorite labor skate!" Weingarten had long resisted allowing teachers to be evaluated at least in part by the

FROM LEFT: KARL GEHRING—DENVER POST-ZUMA, KRISTOFFER TRIPPLAAR—SIPA

1997

As reformers home in on teacher quality, Michelle Rhee launches The New Teacher Project, aimed at recruiting, training, and retaining better public-school instructors.

2001

Congress passes the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandates national benchmarks for student achievement.

2000

A comparative study of Western countries shows U.S. students performing at or below average in math, reading, and science.

2007

Rhee is tapped to run D.C. Public Schools.

test scores of their students. Indeed, in 2008, Weingarten successfully lobbied the New York State Legislature to ban such teacher evaluations in granting tenure. But in January, Weingarten seemed to reverse direction. She gave a speech suggesting that student scores could be one measure (among many) of teacher performance and—in what seemed to be a nod to “The Rubber Room”—proposed to improve the “glacial pace” of disciplining teachers accused of misconduct.

Education reformers greeted her speech with relief but considerable wariness. “Words are important, and hers were good ones,” said Kati Haycock of the Education Trust, a Washington-based advocacy group. “But actions are more important—the devil is in the details.” Sure enough, Weingarten almost immediately seemed to back away from her reform-friendly rhetoric. In Houston, school superintendent Terry Grier welcomed Weingarten’s speech—and was immediately blasted by Weingarten for “deliberately distorting” her position on teacher evaluations. Grier wants to use student scores as a part of a teacher’s evaluation. “I thought we were saying the same thing,” Grier told NEWSWEEK.

The real test will come in Washington. When Rhee took over the D.C. schools in 2007, “8 percent of our eighth graders were on grade level, but all the adults in our schools were rated as exceeding expectations,” Rhee recalled to NEWSWEEK. “How can all the adults think they are doing an excellent job but producing at an 8 percent success level? There’s a wild disconnect there.” Under Rhee, the schools have improved scores and stopped a longtime exodus of students from the system, while instituting what experts describe as the most rigorous and



fair teacher-evaluation system of any big city. Rhee enjoys the backing of Mayor Adrian Fenty, but she is constantly feuding with the City Council, and her many enemies leak negative stories about her to the local press. A divorced mother of two (she fired the principal at her daughter’s school), Rhee is tireless and seemingly unflappable. She is a hero to some teachers and parents, but opinion polls show that she is generally unpopular in the city, despite improved student scores. The Obama White House is generally supportive of Rhee, but administration officials who would not be quoted directly say her heavy-handedness has unnecessarily antagonized union members and prolonged negotiations over a new contract.

Rhee, who seems to have momentum on her side, wants to show that she is rewarding good teachers, not merely bashing bad ones, by making teaching a prestigious job—hard to get, hard to keep, and well compensated. Weingarten is insisting on protections to make sure

her union members cannot be tossed out arbitrarily or unfairly. Both sides want to give teachers more money and encourage their professional development, and both sides want to be able to declare victory, so a compromise should be possible—perhaps preserving tenure in concept (to give Weingarten cover) while giving school administrators more power to move against teachers who are failing their students.

As Rhee notes, there are plenty of good teachers who deserve to be better rewarded. But there are some teachers who should not be in the classroom. “When I visit schools, sometimes I see pure magic,” she says. “People in unbelievably crappy school buildings, dealing with terrible conditions, whose classrooms are alive with learning. They are just unbelievable. And then across the hall is a classroom that’s just the most depressing thing you’ve ever seen. The kids know it. The parents know it. The administration knows it. It’s no secret.” But it is hard to change.

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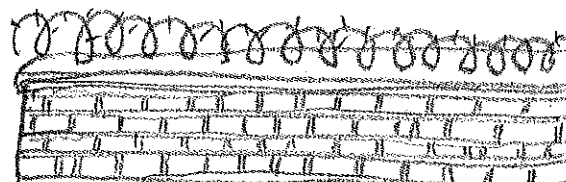
Longtime labor leader Randi Weingarten takes over the American Federation of Teachers, saying she’s open to reform.

2009

Despite high dropout rates and low test scores, districts rate less than 1% of teachers as “unsatisfactory”; Obama launches Race to the Top.

November 2008

Obama is elected after pledging to empower reformers like Rhee.



BLACKBOARD JUNGLE

Freshly minted teachers have passed every test but one:
how to control their classrooms.

BY PAT WINGERT

BACK IN THE '60S, WHEN I ATTENDED the Queen of the Rosary school in suburban Chicago, classroom management was not an issue. We had more than 35 kids in a class, but even first graders knew you sat with your hands folded, eyes on the board, and mouth shut. If you got out of line, you might be sent to the corner. One nun had an amazing pitching arm. She would spin away from the blackboard and bean a slacker with a fully loaded eraser. It didn't hurt. But it was effective.

Now when you talk to new teachers—which I do regularly as an education reporter—their biggest complaint is that no one teaches them how to control a classroom. For the small fortune they spend to get a teaching degree, they get plenty of pedagogy (“Reflections on Learning” is a typical course name), which they generally don't use. But their professors never seem to get around to teaching “Keeping Kids Under Control 101.” Student-teaching stints are typically done in “middle-class districts that are well ordered,” says Aaron M. Pallas, professor of sociology and education at Teachers College at Columbia University, and few colleges offer practical training for those planning to work in tougher settings.

The solution is probably not to encourage teachers to bean kids with erasers. But something is needed. Jennifer Scoggins, 32, a New York teacher currently working on her Ph.D., said she had no chance to succeed when she began her first teaching job in 2001. She was asked to take over a

second-grade class in Harlem midyear—after several other teachers had given up. The kids were out of control when she arrived, and things never improved. “Chairs were being thrown, kids were stabbing each other with pencils,” she said. “I felt absolutely like a total failure. The only thing I was proud of was that I never cried in front of the kids. But I cried everywhere else: in supply closets, on the subway, at home.” Even though Scoggins had earned a master's in education, she said, “very practical things were never taught.”

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has acknowledged what a huge issue classroom management has become. To help improve the situation, the federal government recently dedicated \$21 million to a fledging network of 28 teacher-residency programs (modeled on medical residencies) to give new teachers hands-on training in a real classroom. Later this year Duncan plans to distribute another \$100 million in grants to expand the idea further.

No such programs were available to Scoggins, who thought about quitting teaching altogether after her disastrous first year. But, she said, “I had never been interested in doing anything else.” So she tried again at a different Harlem school, and was assigned to an experienced team that gave her support. “If I was having a problem with a child, someone would come into the room to observe and give me advice,” she said. “I felt like they had my back.” Lots of new teachers wish they could say the same.

