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“If We Look to Buy the Cheapest Paper, Why Not the Cheapest Teachers?”

Fred Klonsky

Around 1972 I was working at the UniRoyal Tire and Rubber factory in the City of Commerce, an industrial suburb of Los Angeles. The front of the factory faced the Santa Ana freeway. For some odd reason it was designed to look like an ancient Egyptian temple.

Behind the Disney-like façade of pharaohs and slaves was a grime-filled, malodorous factory turning out thousands of automobile tires a day.

In 1972 the making of a tire went something like this: Two women, usually African-American, worked on a belt behind the tire making machine. They cut pieces of rubber ply and put them on the belt. Two men, usually white, were in front. One of the men pulled the rubber barrel off a rack and slid it on to a metal arm. One of the guys hit a button and the ply rolled onto the rubber barrel. They hit a second button that swung the barrel into a position to attach the rubber that later became the tread. Button three quickly spun all the tire components until you hit the brake pedal. The barrel broke loose and you slid it off onto another rack.

A tire came off the machine and a counter would flip a number. In 1972 there was not much that was digital.

I was a member of the United Rubber Workers union. Our contract allowed tire making to be piecework. I was paid a minimal base salary. To make any real money I had to make a rate. The rate was adjusted each week. If you made rate for five days, they raised the rate.

It didn't take long for me to realize that controlling—as opposed to making—the rate was most important. I wanted to hit my target most days. But I needed to fall short on others. If I didn't, they would constantly raise the rate. I soon came to understand the simple economics of this process.

I also realized that if I smacked the counter with the palm of my hand just at the moment that my partner was pulling a tire off the machine, the counter would flip twice.

Four decades later I am about to retire from 27 years of teaching. I began my teaching career at the same time as *A Nation at Risk* came out. I retire just as it seems that The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind, is about to be trashed and replaced by some form of a more extensive Race to the Top.

As I exit the classroom, life in schools resembles my days at UniRoyal Tire and Rubber.

I teach in a school in a suburb of Chicago. Park Ridge is an upscale town. It usually has voted Republican and it is white. But that is changing. The town elected its first Democratic State Senator several years ago and voted for Obama by a thin margin.

Compared to when I started teaching in 1984, our K-8 school district is now consumed by assessments. Weeks and weeks of instructional time have been replaced by a world of testing initials: Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (Dibels).

In spite of this, and despite the fact that the time spent on these assessments angers and demoralizes almost every one of my colleagues, our school does very well on all of these assessments. Ninety-seven percent meet and exceed state standards on the state mandated ISAT. This year 100% of our 4th graders did the same on the reading portion of the ISAT.

In a school district that is primarily white and privileged, it's not surprising that our students do well on these tests. But it also doesn't matter.

In schools this is called *continuous improvement*. It's not much different than UniRoyal's piece rate system. Do well and they simply raise the rate. The only thing they want to improve are the scores. It is the extension of Lake Wobegonism, where all children are above average. In this brave new world, all children must meet and exceed 100%. In districts like Atlanta and Philadelphia, continuous improvement has meant taking the palm of your hand and smacking the counter. Cheating scandals are breaking out like a contagious disease.

As the comedian Chris Rock likes to say, "I don't approve. But I understand." Just like a tire builder at UniRoyal, it is a matter of both teachers and school administrators coming to understand the simple economics of the process. Those who demand that schools be run more like a business are now getting what they asked for. There are those in the profit sector who have become expert at knowing how to game the system. Why be surprised when those in the public sector, like principals, order their staff to do the same?

This year a small Tea Party-ish group has begun attending our board meetings. They number two, sometimes three. Some have children in the district's schools. Some do not. They are openly hostile to the teachers and our union. They are either amazingly misinformed, or they are purposefully lying based on the theory that a lie told often enough gets believed as the truth.

At the heart of their attack is the issue of student performance and teacher accountability. Only a few years back we would spend our time discussing issues of teaching and learning. Now we spend the bulk of our team planning time discussing assessments and interventions.

Still, the lies continue about student performance results. They continue to lie about teacher salary and benefits and the language that is in our bargaining agreement about the alleged inability to dismiss poor teachers.

I have been told that Tea Party groups are doing the same thing throughout Illinois. They have organized small groups to attend community board meetings. Some are paid, with the money coming from those like the Koch brothers, multi-billionaire right-wing funders. There are plenty of deep pockets operating here.

Going right after our collective bargaining agreement, they ask, “If we look to buy the cheapest paper, why not the cheapest teachers?”

And our board, pressed by growing financial concerns, must be asking themselves if that isn’t a good point. How much should you have to spend to find someone to prep for and administer a test?