



Week of May 2-6, 2011

## Speaking of Teacher Appreciation . . .

By UCLA IDEA

This is Teacher Appreciation Week. Teachers receive thank-you notes and cards, snacks, donations for classroom supplies, and other sincere tokens of appreciation. Dignitaries, editorial writers, and other opinion leaders reflect on the crucial role that teachers have played in their own lives and in building the nation. In spite of their deep worries about education and learning opportunities, most people hold positive views of teachers. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote an open letter to teachers to say how much he values the profession and how he wants to see teachers treated with respect.

Duncan wrote: "Because of the pressure to boost test scores, [No Child Left Behind] has narrowed the curriculum, and important subjects like history, science, the arts, foreign languages, and physical education have been de-emphasized. And you are frustrated when teachers alone are blamed for educational failures that have roots in broken families, unsafe communities, misguided reforms, and underfunded schools systems."

Secretary Duncan's words seem decent and heartfelt, so why do so many people have trouble reconciling his words with the administration's current policies? Perhaps it's because the policies continue to emphasize test scores and turn away from the other learning values and measures that Duncan says are important. For example, the Race to the Top grant competition awarded the most points to those states that tied improved test scores to teachers' evaluations. Also, Duncan's words are open to more troubling interpretations than might appear on first reading. Some might take him to mean that teachers share *equal* blame for the sorry state of the nation's education—along with crushing poverty, underfunded schools and misguided policies. One analyst has argued, "When we don't get the results we want in our military endeavors, we don't blame the soldiers."

"Respect is appreciated—the pink slip is not" went one comment about Duncan's letter. It is hard to feel both appreciated and vulnerable. In California, 30,000 teachers have been laid off in the past three years. This spring, 19,000 pink slips were issued to teachers. Even as many teachers are appealing the pink slips, school districts are mandated to let them know before Sunday if they'll be let go.

A neglected way to recognize teachers' competence and dedication is to support them with policies that take advantage of the creative and productive work they are capable of doing. Schools need to offer competitive salaries to attract the best-trained college graduates who will remain in the field for their career—not just a few years. Although degrees and credentials are critical, these are not sufficient. Once skilled people are attracted to the profession, they need professional working conditions, strong supportive leadership and time to collaborate with colleagues. They need manageable class sizes to design instruction that best suits each student.

Finally, teachers want much more than appreciation and respect for themselves. They want a nation that respects its children with guarantees that they will be well fed, clothed, sheltered, and productively occupied with play, learning and supervision. The best "thank-you" gift for teachers would be policies that care about kids.

####

For links to news articles, read our *Themes in the News* online.

[www.ucla-idea.org](http://www.ucla-idea.org)