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Ari Kaufman: Heels dug in against 'change'

The word is being widely used, but don't speak it about public education

By **ARI KAUFMAN**

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A recent Gallup Poll reported that nearly 85 percent of Americans are happy with their lives. (I'd include myself in that group.) Yet if you watch the presidential campaigns, especially on the Democratic side, you'll regularly hear how Americans are dispirited, financially strapped and desperate for a change. While change is often necessary and worth the effort, sometimes change is impossible to accomplish, even for a president.

Changes to the welfare and criminal justice systems or a change toward reduced federal

spending habits would be welcome by many. So would a change for the better in American public education, where we lag behind the rest of the modern world.

Nonetheless, as Michael Barone reported in his 2004 book "Hard America, Soft America," which acknowledges how "soft" public education is, veteran social scientists found that big-city public school systems "are the toughest and least-malleable bureaucracies" they researched.

Apparently, teachers and, certainly, the unions that protect them don't feel the need to practice what they preach. This is fascinating, coming from a group of people who not only typically consider themselves "progressive" and who wholly support these Democrats while resisting change at every turn.

Considering that, what's interesting though not surprising, is that for the past two decades, Hillary Clinton, the self-styled "agent of change," has received support from the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers in the form of millions of dollars and votes. They've financed attack ads against her opponents, and her callow "It takes a Village to raise a child" quote is emblazoned in numerous public school libraries I saw in the Southland over the course of my five years in education.

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Despite all that, fair-minded education reformists and nearly all the non-teaching Americans I know, irrespective of political tilt, permit millions of dollars in federal money (President Bush gets no "credit" from his detractors for spending more money on education than any president in history) to implement simple and needed change to save our kids' future. And the unions still fabricate the issues to destroy these progressive plans of needed change, as clearly seen in 2005 with Gov. Schwarzenegger's failed slate of referenda.

In response to a published article of mine on education, I recently received a profanity-laced tirade from a teacher, admonishing me for my reform-minded thinking. It contained many of the usual arguments. Here's an excerpt:

"I have never read anything more offensive. As a teacher for 25 years, who do you think you are? You think teaching for a few years qualifies you to make statements like that? People teach because they love educating children and teens. You obviously could not cut it as a teacher. ... You need to ditch the holier-than-thou attitude. The last thing this country needs is someone like you educating our children. Sounds like you got exactly what you deserved."

I omitted the rest of the writer's

personal insults and vulgarity, which was excessive but telling.

I have received at least one per month of these kinds of letters since I began writing education articles while still teaching early in 2005, so I am immune by now. While I appreciate their viewpoint, there's rarely anything concrete in such ramblings. Journalists and many others could spend one month at your local school and come to similar conclusions as I did.

Folks like ABC's John Stossel have, in fact.

Lacking tenure, I spoke up. The path of self-preservation would have been to button my lip, work hard for two years, get tenured, then start writing opinion pieces about how California's educational system needed change. But rather than hypocritically accepting what I saw around me, I spoke up, and paid the price.

It seems like every teacher who disagrees with me speaks the same mantra: They aver that I should not be allowed tell a veteran how to teach. But, lo and behold, if these folks were ambitious and new to a company in the "real world" or an enterprise such as the military, they would be the first to tell their superiors to stop doing things the old-fashioned way and come up to speed in the 21st century. Only when *their* jobs are

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being critiqued do they rely on the conservative notion that veterans of an organization always know best.

It would be different if their organization were Microsoft or a similar success story. But this is the education system they're defending, which is obviously a failed system by any indicator of evidence on international tests, or by simply speaking to 90 percent of today's recent high school graduates.

Public consensus on the need for "change" in education could not be higher, nor could education's aversion to it. If history is a guide though, I'd bet the establishment's position will never waver. That doesn't seem very consistent or open-minded to me.

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