

# America's School System: Why the Attack on Tenure?

By [Steven Jonas](#)

Global Research, February 18, 2015  
[Truth Out](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

*Tenure for K-12 teachers has been under attack from the Right for a long time. In many states, like Virginia, it does not exist. But now a new attack is being mounted by an [ex-news anchor named Campbell Brown](#). Brown claims that THE cause of bad education in bad schools is bad teachers. And then she goes on to claim that THE solution to getting rid of bad teachers is to end tenure. Of course, the substitute for no tenure would presumably mean no protections of any kind for teachers, against arbitrary firings. They could be done by whomever would then be in charge of the firings. However, details on the latter do not seem to be on Brown's agenda for description.*

But critics of the Brown type, and the Joe Klein type, don't often get into the programs that they propose to substitute for the programs they wish to eliminate (like the Repubs. on Obamacare, but that's another matter.) [Joe Klein](#), you may remember, is the businessman that Mayor Mike Bloomberg of New York City first put in charge of the city schools. He did prove one thing: someone with no background in education other than his own is unlikely to be able to effectively lead the nations' largest school system (and one of the worlds largest, to boot).

The main argument here is that indeed there are bad teachers in every school system whether they have tenure protections or not. Of course there are bad news anchors who cannot hold a job and there are businessmen who cannot effectively run a school system, but that's another matter too. Not that there are that [many bad teachers](#), possibly up to 5 percent. But, and this is the big BUT, getting rid of tenure would in no way ensure that bad teachers would be gotten rid of.

If there were fewer bad teachers and even more good ones (95% ain't bad, although doctors and lawyers do better; only somewhere around 1 in 57 doctors and 1 in 97 lawyers lose their licenses at some point [during their careers](#)), U.S. education would likely be marginally better than it is. One wonders if, once tenure were to be gone, Ms. Brown and Mr. Klein would be running around the country speaking and writing books about arbitrary firings by principals, school boards, politicians, and what have you, with possibly no effect on the overall quality of teachers. That is because, of course, there is no guarantee that the new teacher-firing system would do any better than the present one.

Yes, the tenure protection system could be significantly improved. But it must be recalled that what can be complex procedures for removing under-performing teachers were put in place, not by the teachers' unions alone, but by the collectively bargained negotiations between the unions and the employer local school boards and governments. The latter

were often happy to provide for rather byzantine removal processes in exchange for concessions on wages, working conditions, and pensions. At the same time, the more progressive unions, like the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, have made proposals to make them less byzantine, without getting rid of tenure protections. But, as noted, getting rid of tenure would be no guarantee to getting rid of bad teachers. In fact, depending upon how one defines “bad,” there might be more of them in non-tenure systems than in systems with tenure. Randy Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, [has pointed out](#) “that the states with the best protections for teachers also have the best academic performance.”

So why, really, the attack on tenure? First of all, somehow there always (or, OK, almost always) seems to be an association with the anti-tenure folks and the charter school folks. In most states (but not all, Maryland is one exception) teachers in charter schools do not have union protections. So there would seem to be an association between destroying tenure and destroying the teachers’ unions. Doing so would remove one of the last remaining redoubts of trade unionism that [has been under the assault](#) of the US ruling class since the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. Trade union membership in this country has never been very high, reaching a peak of about 35% right after World War II. By 2013 [it had declined](#) to about 11% and it continues to decline. But it is the public employee sector that still has the highest percentage of union membership and that’s the one the Kochs and like-minded members of the ruling class are going after.

Further, as profit opportunities for US capital in the US continue to decline (collateralized mortgage obligations/derivatives, anyone?) it is looking sheep’s-eyes at the education system. Could it be a coincidence that many Wall-Streeters are on the side of destroying the unions to get at public education and replace it with for-profit charter schools? At the same time, polls show that tenure protection is so important to teachers who have it, that their salaries would have to be increased by up to half were it to be taken away ([Richard Kahlenberg, Carnegie Foundation](#)). Of course that wouldn’t happen, so what kinds of teachers do you think would be working for less?

The ultimate tragedy for parents of children receiving poor education in their schools who have become Brown followers is that they have been tricked into thinking that getting rid of tenure to “get rid of bad teachers” (which it might very well not do anyway) is going to solve the problem of bad schools. That is when the additional major causes range from class size, to antiquated buildings, to the lack of basic supplies, equipment, and library books) to, in order to save money, the mainstreaming of children who really require special help and in regular classes become regularly disruptive, to not enough teachers (at the height of the Bush Great Recession and the same decline in the local and state tax revenues that support public education, 700,000 teachers had lost their jobs). But these are tough targets so Brown and Klein target the easy one. What was that about sitting in an Ivory Tower?

**Postscript:** On Teach for America (from a [New York Times article](#) that appeared after I had written the original Commentary). It [turns out](#) that TfA is: a) closely affiliated with the charter school movement, sending many of the people to them, b) surprise, surprise, also closely linked with mandatory testing standards, the linkage of teacher performance evaluations to student test results, and “weakening of teacher tenure,” and c) as the overall employment market for college graduates improves, applications for TfA declined for the second year in a row. In a separate critique of TfA, candidates get five weeks of teacher training before being thrust into the classroom and in most places stay on the job for just two years. This is preparing college graduates for careers in education? This is supposed to improve overall

teacher standards in the US? Why no. But it sure does help charter schools fill their slots that fully qualified teachers wouldn't take.

The original source of this article is [Truth Out](#)  
Copyright © [Steven Jonas](#), [Truth Out](#), 2015

---

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Steven Jonas](#)

**Disclaimer:** The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)

[www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca) contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: [publications@globalresearch.ca](mailto:publications@globalresearch.ca)