

Richard Berman: No Hollywood ending for some teachers

By Richard Berman

Everyone loves a great teacher. The continued success of movies like "Freedom Writers" or other classics in the genre indicates that we love big-screen reassurance that a great teacher can set hearts aflame with desire for learning, no matter the circumstances.

But the camera doesn't show everything.

Jaime Escalante, the legendary teacher immortalized in "Stand and Deliver," left his own East L.A. math program after it became a victim of its own success, one fact the movie did not mention. His classes were so popular that they grew beyond the size considered acceptable by the teachers union. Explaining his departure, Escalante said: "I work for the students, not for the teachers. ... The teachers union was not in my favor."

Union rules also prevented Escalante protégé Angelo Villavicencio from counting his years under the legend towards seniority-based pay when he went to teach in Chino.

The subject of the new Hillary Swank film, "Freedom Writers," also ran afoul of her teachers union. English teacher Erin Gruwell took 150 disadvantaged Long Beach kids, instilled in them a love of writing, and brought every last

one of them to graduation. This despite her union's seniority rules: The wildly successful young teacher was held back from moving up with her students (since union seniority, not success, determined who taught what subjects) until she successfully lobbied the school board for an exemption.

The list of exceptional teachers hamstrung by their unions isn't limited to the ones featured by Hollywood. Dr. Cathy Nelson, trumpeted by the union Education Minnesota as the state's Teacher of the Year, was laid off months before receiving the award. Her school was shedding students, and its union contract required that the most junior teachers be fired first.

Another example: On May 28, 1998, Sarah Gustafson was named to the Florida Educator Hall of Fame. On May 29, 1998, Sarah Gustafson was fired. For her lack of seniority.

These examples make for dark comedy, but the state of American education is anything but funny. Too many great teachers are held back by union policies – the same "rights" won by union organizers are the very things that can deny more children access to great teachers.

Some union leaders counter criticism by saying that their contracts protect good teachers from arbitrary administrators. But if that's true,

why not demand greater professionalism for principals instead of dropping standards for teachers?

What can a union offer a talented, professional-minded young woman or man? They know that trading away performance-based pay for ironclad job security is no bargain at all, since being a good teacher doesn't seem to ensure job security.

There may be a political solution to union dominance in schools, but it turns out that politics is their strong suit. As a 2006 study discovered, unionized teachers in Southern California turn out for school board elections at a rate five times higher than registered voters. It seems that Erin Gruwell wasn't just an exceptional mentor to her Freedom Writers. She was also lucky to have a board president willing to rock the boat.

As the movies tell us, there are only so many Erin Gruwells and Jaime Escalantes, only so many Cathy Nelsons and Sarah Gustafsons. We can't hope to run American education on the blood of martyrs. If unions would loosen their death grip on public schools, we won't have to.

Richard Berman is the Executive director of The Center for Union Facts, a business-backed organization critical of some union leadership.