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Blowback

A real school reformer for Obama

Linda Darling-Hammond, the president-elect's education transition chief, is a leader in developing innovative programs that provide models for reform.

By Jeremy Lahoud

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Rather than recycle sound bites as evidence of one's credentials as an "education reformer," it would behoove The Times and other national media outlets to be a little more like Linda Darling-Hammond (President-elect Barack Obama's transition chief on education policy) and do their research.

In its Dec. 12 editorial, "Obama's choice on education," The Times states that "Darling-Hammond's early attacks on Teach for America ... give us little confidence that she would support innovative approaches to education." Had The Times done better research, it would have known that Darling-Hammond's critique of Teach for America was based on her comprehensive study of the program. Her study, released in 2005, gathered evidence from more than 130,000 fourth- and fifth-graders and showed that students taught by certified teachers outperformed students who were instructed by the less experienced, uncertified teachers recruited through Teach for America. In addition, she found that Teach for America recruits tended to leave the teaching profession only two or three years after being hired. This does not sound like a hollow attack, but a critique based on the same standards of accountability for higher student achievement and expectations that The Times purports the other side of the education debate to uphold.

As for The Times' skepticism over Darling-Hammond support for "innovative approaches to education," again, the evidence shows that the Stanford professor has been a leader in the field of innovative education programs that provide models for effective reform. Her on-the-ground work and research on effective small schools, especially at the high school level, is on the cutting edge of reform efforts to ensure that all children, especially those who face the most disadvantages in the public education system, can achieve at high levels.

In her 2002 study that profiled dozens of effective small schools, "Redesigning Schools: What Matters and What Works (10 Features of Good Small Schools)," Darling-Hammond argues, "Successful small schools have a clear goal: They want all students to achieve to high standards, and they are clear about what students should know and be able to do when they graduate." That seems like a vision for schools on which "education reformers" from all sides could all agree.

While Darling-Hammond's definitions of "reform" and "standards" may not match the current politicized understanding of those terms, her vision for transforming public schools is in line with the desires and dreams of the majority of public school students and parents across the nation. As someone who personally works with students, parents and educators across California to work for an equitable, high-quality education every day, I know that Darling-Hammond is an excellent person for Obama to keep as a close education policy advisor. She is not only respected among academics, she also has broad support among grass-roots community organizers and educators because of her dedication to progressive education reform and her commitment to closing the opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color.

Unfortunately, Obama has apparently passed over Darling-Hammond and has instead chosen Chicago schools chief Arne Duncan to be his Education secretary. Obama can still keep his promises to bring real change America's education system by giving Darling-Hammond a prominent role in his administration.

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