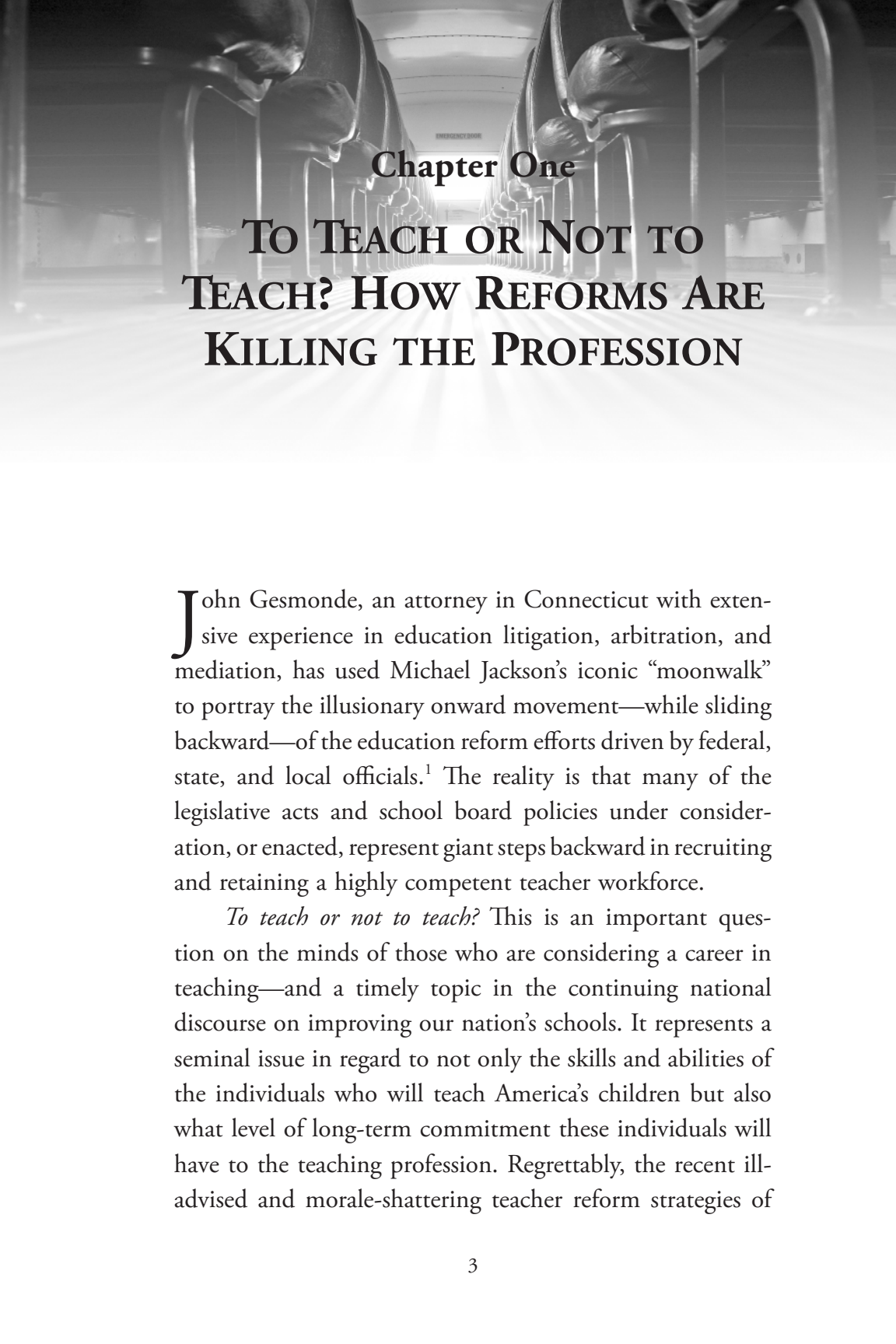




Part One

**AMERICA'S TEACHERS:
"WE ARE THE HEROES WE
HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR"**

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Chapter One

TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH? HOW REFORMS ARE KILLING THE PROFESSION

John Gesmonde, an attorney in Connecticut with extensive experience in education litigation, arbitration, and mediation, has used Michael Jackson’s iconic “moonwalk” to portray the illusionary onward movement—while sliding backward—of the education reform efforts driven by federal, state, and local officials.¹ The reality is that many of the legislative acts and school board policies under consideration, or enacted, represent giant steps backward in recruiting and retaining a highly competent teacher workforce.

To teach or not to teach? This is an important question on the minds of those who are considering a career in teaching—and a timely topic in the continuing national discourse on improving our nation’s schools. It represents a seminal issue in regard to not only the skills and abilities of the individuals who will teach America’s children but also what level of long-term commitment these individuals will have to the teaching profession. Regrettably, the recent ill-advised and morale-shattering teacher reform strategies of

state legislators, governors, and municipal leaders—partly fueled by their obsession with “racing to the money”—have become pursuits fueled by the misguided mandates of the Race to the Top and School Improvement Grants initiatives. This obsession has apparently caused them not to consider the impact of their decisions on prospective teachers considering whether or not to enter the profession—or to stay in the profession.

Consider recent policy developments in many school districts that have resulted in overturning collective bargaining rights; depleting health benefits; dismantling tenure; promoting merit pay; and removing seniority and job security. Taken collectively, these changes have largely served as disincentives for individuals to enter the teaching profession or to remain in teaching. They also represent a blatant disregard for the hard work and dedication of our nation’s teaching force. Are there incompetent teachers? Yes. Should such teachers be replaced? Of course. Do tenure and seniority present a problem? Without question. But addressing these problems as systemic rather than as individual personnel issues represents a frontal attack on the vast universe of teachers who daily perform one of our nation’s greatest services—teaching our students.

Now also consider the negative impact of the recent wave of legislative actions and other school district edicts to take away from teachers the rights and benefits that have long been major components of their profession, and that they have fought long and hard to retain. Finally, consider the realistic impact of the isolated world within which a teacher works, generally confined to the walls of her or his classroom and void of contact with other adults during the school day.

WOULD YOU TAKE THIS JOB? WHAT AN HONEST MARKETING TOOL TO TEACHERS WOULD LOOK LIKE

To help readers fully appreciate the impact of escalating legislative actions, school board policies, and timeworn realities on the teaching profession, I have developed a recruitment tool that in my opinion reflects these considerations. Critics may suggest that the picture I paint of the conditions teachers face is overkill. They may also take exception to my characterization of the isolated lifestyle of a classroom teacher. As a rejoinder, let me say that it is my firm conviction that all of the conditions I cite represent a “real and present danger,” and a potentially catastrophic future, for school districts in their recruitment of a teaching force. This danger is a direct result of the policies and legislation that unappreciative and inadequately informed federal officials, state legislators, and local school boards have implemented, or have under consideration. I predict that their unwise and rash manifestations have the potential to change forever the landscape of a proud profession.

Why Choose Teaching as a Career? Important Facts (Or, an Honest Recruitment Tool)

1. *You will receive drastically reduced health benefits compared to what teachers have traditionally received, the cost of which will now be your responsibility, even though your salary will remain well below those of other professions requiring similar qualifications.*

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2. *You will continue to receive a substandard salary compared to those of other professions.* On average, the national starting salary of new teachers is approximately \$39,000. The region of the country where you plan to teach will determine your specific starting salary. Keep in mind that many states have starting salaries that are very low, in the mid- to high-\$20,000 range. It is expected that these much lower salaries will not dissuade you from making a career decision to enter the profession. After all, it appears to be the general consensus of the naysayers of the profession—those individuals who have lost faith in public education and its teachers—that teachers, unlike other professionals, seemingly do not need financial stability in their lives, and that they teach for the love of what they do!
3. *You will be expected to work long hours every day, and often on weekends*—contrary to what those individuals far removed from classroom realities believe or understand to be a teacher’s work schedule. Your extended days will be a result of what is expected of classroom teachers, such as
 - Class and individual student lesson planning
 - Correcting student papers and grading student performance
 - Participating in professional development activities to enhance your area of expertise
 - Continual online communication and face-to-face conferences with students and parents
 - Ongoing consultation with other teachers and professional staff

- Attending planning and placement sessions for students with special needs
- Completing the never-ending paperwork requirements imposed by administrators

Unfortunately, the majority of these responsibilities—unlike in other professions in which sufficient time is provided during the regular workday—must take place outside of traditional work hours, in that teachers are not allocated time in their school day to accomplish these countless and complex responsibilities.

4. *You will have little, if any, free time during the traditional 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. school day, a condition that is especially true for elementary and self-contained classroom teachers. You will not, in effect, have time for consulting with other teachers in the building, taking an occasional ten-minute respite from your classroom responsibilities, enjoying a coffee break with colleagues, or contacting parents—and unless you really learn to control your urinary tract, you may not have time to pee! Of course, if this latter problem persists, legislators, again displaying their infinite wisdom, may very well enact legislation to ensure the necessary funding to provide interested teachers with catheters (kidding, of course!).*

Keep in mind that some individuals continually articulate that teachers have a “cushy” work schedule. As they make such ridiculous pronouncements, they will continue to have opportunities throughout their

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workday for numerous coffee breaks; intervals of relaxation; regular interaction with their colleagues; and a lengthy lunch period—away from the work environment, often at a local restaurant. Amazingly, they may also use a lavatory whenever their bodily needs arise! But alas, they still lament that they do not have the “cushy” lifestyle of a teacher.

5. *You will have to learn to eat your lunch within about twenty to thirty minutes, and in many cases you will have to digest your food while in the presence of your students.* Of course, in the vast majority of cases, you will not be allowed leave the school grounds to have your lunch—and meeting family and friends over the lunch hour is a definite no-no.
6. *You must be prepared to have your annual evaluation partially or in some cases almost wholly based on a state test administered once each school year.* Whatever other assessments and learning activities your students engage in on the remaining 179 days of the school year are not likely to carry the same weight with evaluators as this single state test. Also, consider putting aside any interest you may have in teaching subjects that may instill in students an interest in and excitement for learning, such as the arts, the humanities, physical education, and others. Regrettably, you will probably receive zero evaluation credit for your efforts or accomplishments in these subject areas.

You should be aware that your annual evaluation results might improve dramatically, simply by your seeking a job opportunity in a state that has

lower proficiency standards for students. Conversely, if you receive a satisfactory evaluation in your state, you should exercise great caution in considering a transfer to a state with higher proficiency standards for students. The ultimate irony is that all states set their own proficiency standards, so an incompetent teacher in one state may be a superstar in another—or vice versa. So much for fairness and logic!

7. *Your annual evaluation may be made publicly available to parents, students, the general public, and the news media.* Such public notice may also include rankings of teachers from best to worst. These rankings will probably not distinguish between teachers working in an affluent neighborhood school and teachers working in a school serving an impoverished community. It is more than likely that the rankings will not take into consideration the number of English language learners in your classroom, nor will they reflect the number of your students with special needs. You may, of course, make a career decision to apply or transfer to a school or district in your state with a high percentage of students from affluent homes, and with fewer students in need of academic assistance. A simple move of this type would almost certainly guarantee that your public image, status, and ranking as a teacher will be dramatically elevated.
8. *You may work in a school system that, based on legislative actions or school board policies, does not protect the*
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seniority status of teachers. Although you may eventually have several years of experience and receive satisfactory evaluations for those years, your position has the potential to be furloughed or terminated. Without the protection of seniority, a school superintendent may, for personal reasons, summarily decide to dismiss you. Alternatively, such a decision may be initiated by a disgruntled board of education member or a local legislator for highly questionable reasons, including a personal dislike for you as a teacher, unkind feedback from parents, a desire to fill the position with a friend or relative, or political patronage. This type of “dishonesty” in personnel decisions will be exacerbated as seniority in teaching becomes a faint memory.

The fact is that teachers’ union contracts were historically written with school boards to ensure that such nefarious personnel practices were minimized, and that teachers’ rights were upheld. It now appears that the potential exists for superintendents, school board members, and local legislators to return to the practices exhibited in the “dark days” before seniority. During this period, it was common to see unsubstantiated, ill-advised, and in some cases illegal decisions in the hiring and firing of teachers.

Although there are, without question, senior teachers with poor evaluations who should be terminated, state and local leaders are choosing to illogically place all senior teachers in the same box—instead of committing to addressing seniority problems as

individual personnel decisions. In addition, if local administrators had been diligent over the years in their supervision and evaluation responsibilities, ineffective senior teachers would have been identified much earlier. And if these teachers had not improved their practice, they would have been terminated prior to receiving tenure.

9. *You will have to come to grips with the reality that although your career choice to become a teacher represents a noble and grand commitment, a career in teaching essentially removes you from the financial stability, multiple benefits, social standing, and professional appreciation another career might afford. But always keep in mind that the joy of teaching far exceeds the “superficial rewards” of other well-paid and socially elevated professions!*
10. *You need to be ready, as a member of the teaching profession, to accept the blame for all of society’s problems, including the downturn in the economy, the decline in our nation’s standing as a world power, and any other circumstance or event for which a scapegoat is not readily available!*

You should carefully consider all of the realities of teaching just listed prior to deciding to enter the teaching profession. Although admittedly there are major and troublesome changes and disruptions on the horizon, great teachers always overcome such obstacles and become champions for their enduring commitment to children. I hope you will make the right decision!

A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE NEW REALITIES FOR TEACHERS

My representation of the realities facing teachers is not intended to dissuade interested and committed young people from choosing what I consider to be a wonderful, inspiring, and fulfilling career path. However, I feel compelled to bring into clear perspective the effects of many legislative and school board actions and policies that may result in fewer young people entering the profession. I am also confronted with the reality that veteran teachers may decide that they have experienced enough professional adversity and inadequate appreciation—*the end result being that they may decide to move on to other career opportunities.*

As someone who has devoted his life to education, I find it enormously frustrating to observe the various machinations of far-removed legislators and not-very-well-informed school board members that wreak unwarranted and undeserved havoc on teachers. Teachers are professionals who on a daily basis offer their expertise to, and show their love for, our nation's most important resource—its children. They daily perform magnanimous work—in spite of minimal salaries, a lack of appreciation for their efforts, and a continuing avalanche of disdain from government and corporate leaders. They do not deserve the cascades of reform that threaten to drown them—and to forever change the landscape and environment of the teaching profession.

I can't help but feel anger and resentment toward federal and state legislators, policy gurus, and foundation and corporate leaders who are largely responsible for setting an agenda for teacher reform—many components of which

translate into a form of “teacher bashing.” They are only serving to remove teachers from decisions and actions that have an impact on their profession and their very livelihood. My anger is intensified by the reality that their actions and the onerous burdens they impose on teachers are taking the “soul” out of teaching—the essence of what teaching is, including creativity, professionalism, inspiration, devotion, commitment, and pride. If they are successful in removing the soul, they will leave behind a hollow teaching force of script-following and uninspired classroom automatons—an outcome that violates the underlying principles of respect and honor for a profession dedicated to educating our nation’s children.

In spite of my concerns, I also feel a sense of hope and optimism, engendered by a belief that the issues and concerns I have articulated will capture the attention of those individuals who continue to be naysayers of the teaching profession—who have demonstrated little or no respect for teachers, as evidenced by their ill-advised legislative actions and policies. The publication of this book is intended to cause such an “awakening.”

This awakening would ideally cause the “distant reformers” to pause in imposing their will on our nation’s teachers. I hope they can truly be brought to understand the negative, demeaning, and demoralizing impact of their ill-founded actions and policies on our nation’s teachers. I hope they will step back and repair, modify, and dismantle, in a timely manner, the egregious reform initiatives they have placed in the path of teachers. It can reasonably be projected that if these reforms go unmodified, they may very well result in the demise of a proud profession.

ONE TEACHER'S LAMENT

To give credence to my deep concerns, consider the lament of one experienced and highly regarded teacher. Angela Beeley, a National Board Certified Teacher in California, expresses her views on the frustration and anger of teachers in her 2011 article “Mad as Hell.” Her commentary is on target and should be required reading for federal officials, legislators, and school board members who continually display errant behavior in shaping laws and policies that are detrimental to the future of the teaching profession. Beeley writes: “I love my students, but who on earth does the public—which is accepting these political shenanigans—think will choose to become a teacher now? No one in his or her right mind would go into this profession. After seeing teachers beaten up in the media for our society’s failings and being portrayed as lazy fat cats, when we are working our butts off having to ‘teach’ to a test, no student with two brain cells to rub together is going to want to become a teacher.”²

Beeley also offers, in the same editorial, a challenge to Wisconsin’s governor, an architect of some of the most egregious “teacher bashing” legislation in the nation, as well as to others who continually put teachers down: “I challenge anyone—including Wisconsin’s governor—who thinks that teaching requires little effort, no summer break or no decent salary, to spend a year in my classroom. Get in there, Governor Walker. You wouldn’t last a week.”³

I suspect there are legions of teachers who share Beeley’s frustration and disdain concerning the avalanche of onerous and debilitating teacher reform legislation and policies—and who share her view as to the dismal future of teacher recruitment.