

ON EDUCATION

Where Teachers Sit, Awaiting Their Fates

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN Published: October 10, 2007

Back in 1968, when he was a graduate student of 24, Ivan Valtchev boarded a ferry from the Polish coast to Stockholm. It was the final leg in a complex and risky process of escaping to the West from his native Bulgaria. Newly free, he believed that he had left totalitarianism forever behind.

Mr. Valtchev made his way eventually to the United States, becoming an artist whose etchings were exhibited at the National Gallery. He taught at the college and secondary levels, most recently at the High School of Graphic Communication Arts in Manhattan.

But on Aug. 30, when Mr. Valtchev reported to a security guard on the eighth floor of an office building near Midtown, he experienced a certain sense of gulag déjà vu. He had been ordered by his principal to a reassignment center, more commonly known among New York teachers as a "rubber room."

The room in question was about 1,100 square feet and on blueprints submitted to the Fire Department was designed to hold 26 people. On this day, it contained upward of 75. It had no windows, no land phone, no Internet access, no wall decorations, not even a clock. Any personal belongings left overnight were removed by custodians.

Some of the occupants faced criminal charges like assault, while others had been brought up by city education officials for termination due to incompetence or other causes. Still more, including Mr. Valtchev, had not yet received a formal letter specifying any allegation. Until their cases are resolved, which can take years, all are required to spend the 181 days of the school year in the rubber room.

And although the teachers there receive their full salaries, the stale, spartan conditions and the absence of any physical or intellectual stimulation provide a ceaseless reminder that in some respects they are guilty until proved innocent.

"There is a spirit of the K.G.B. about it," Mr. Valtchev said in an interview on Monday. "Their main strategy is to destabilize the person, reduce his self-respect.

"It's extremely oppressive. It's regimented. It's unhappy. There's friendship and camaraderie among us in the room, but there's a constant atmosphere of fear. And deep depression."

Throughout New York City, the Department of Education operates 12 reassignment centers, populated at any one time by about 760 teachers from a total work force of 80,000. And, let's face it, they can be a hard bunch to defend.

During my own 20 years of observing and writing about public education in New York,

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I've seen firsthand how exasperatingly difficult it has been for principals to oust abusive, incapable or negligent teachers who are protected by a powerful union. Instead, some principals would privately agree to swap problem teachers in a process known as "trading turkeys." Others would offer such teachers a positive rating if they used their seniority to transfer to a different school.

The transfer rules were ended in 2005, under an agreement between the city and the teachers' union. That same accord also slightly streamlined the process of bringing termination cases before an arbitrator. But I've also reported on examples of quality teachers persecuted by insecure or dictatorial administrators for being active in the union, speaking to the press or merely having independent views on curriculum. Not every teacher in the rubber room deserves the fate, even if some surely do.

Arbitrators and courts will weigh the evidence in each case. So why are those who have been charged, but not convicted, consigned to places like the eighth-floor room at 333 Seventh Avenue, which seem intended to mete out punishment long before any verdict has been issued?

"From our perspective, it's not punitive," said Andrew Gordon, the director of employee relations at the department. "It's all about respect for the other employees" both in the rubber room itself and in other department offices on the floor, he said. Of the ban on keeping personal items, he said: "We don't want to play policeman. It turns into an administrative nightmare."

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