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School unions are out for themselves

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Earlier this year Robert Chanin, the recently retired general counsel for the National Education Association, discussed the effectiveness of teachers unions at a gathering in San Diego.

"Despite what some of us would like to believe, it is not because of our creative ideas," Chanin said. "It is not because of the merit of our positions. It is not because we care about children. And it is not because we have a vision of a great public school for every child.

"NEA and its affiliates are effective advocates because we have power."

Chanin's honesty was refreshing. For too long the NEA, as well as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have been hiding their intentions behind the guise of student advocacy, using children as human shields to block criticism.

But the truth is that the NEA and AFT are huge national labor unions with political agendas and have a great deal of influence with state and national lawmakers.

It's important for the American people to understand how they use that power to obstruct desperately needed educational reforms, particularly those involving school choice and increased teacher accountability. They fear reform will threaten their guaranteed clientele of students and job security.

The unions' militant strategy is putting them at odds with leaders of both political parties. Many Democrats, including President Barack Obama, have joined Republicans in calling for fundamental changes in education.

Last year NEA members stood in silence at their national convention when Obama called for merit pay. This year they booed Education Secretary Arne Duncan when he called for more teacher accountability.

But political isolation only increases their determination.

Consider their position on charter schools, the independent public schools. The unions tried to kill charters in their infancy, but now that it's clear they're here to stay, the NEA and AFT have a new strategy.

They're recruiting charter school teachers as members, so charter schools will be plagued with the same labor upheaval that has damaged so many traditional schools. The goal is death by infiltration.

There are many other examples of union anti-reform efforts. The NEA recently contacted every U.S. senator, suggesting political retribution if they voted to reauthorize the District of Columbia's successful Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher initiative that helps inner-city children escape failing schools.

In Detroit Public Schools, the Detroit Federation of Teachers threatened to strike when the emergency financial manager called for teacher merit pay and an end to the seniority system. The manager and union currently have another month to go in a two-month extension of bargaining talks.

In Wisconsin, the NEA is using its clout to block legislation that would allow teacher evaluations to be linked to student performance. Obama won't provide education stimulus dollars to states that refuse to link the two, but that doesn't bother the union.

Reasonable leaders from both parties are calling for changes in education, while the unions are using their political muscle to defend an outdated system. It's time for the American people to demand education policies that benefit students, not the self-serving teachers unions.

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