



Winds of change are blowing, despite teachers unions' best efforts

by Kyle Olson

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 true intentions behind the guise of student advocacy, using children as human shields to block political 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. They oppose increased teacher accountability, merit pay, charter schools, tenure reform, vouchers and other worthwhile initiatives, regardless of their potential benefits.

They fear reform will threaten their guaranteed clientele of students, as well as their tenure-based job security and lucrative benefits. Their agenda has little to do with providing the best possible education for children. It's about preserving the status quo and their powerful position within the education establishment.

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

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

And political isolation only increases their determination.

Consider their position on charter schools. The unions tried 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 the new schools will be plagued with the same labor upheaval that has damaged so many traditional schools. The goal is death by infiltration.

"It is reasonable to believe that as more charters are faced with having to be more like traditional public schools...many of them will dry up," wrote Keith Johnson, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers.

In our research for our websites, NEAexposed.com and AFTexposed.com, we have discovered many other examples of union anti-reform efforts.

The NEA recently wrote to every U.S. senator, warning that they would be held politically accountable if they voted to reauthorize D.C.'s successful Opportunity Scholarship Program, a voucher initiative designed to help inner-city children escape failing schools.

In Detroit Public Schools, the AFT threatened to strike when the emergency financial manager called for teacher merit pay and an end to the seniority system.

In Wisconsin, the NEA is using its political 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.

The battle lines are drawn. 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 check into this debate, and demand education policies that benefit our students, not the self-serving teachers unions.

-Kyle Olson is vice president of the Michigan-based Education Action Group Foundation and editor of the national websites "NEAexposed.com" and "AFTexposed.com."

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