



Insight

Teacher Unions – The Big Bully in the Classroom

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Over the past decade, national campaigns and legislation have been introduced to reduce bullying in the classroom. Many states have passed legislation to make teachers, parents and principals more aware of the first signs of bullying so they can stop it early. States and schools are also applying much more severe penalties for bullying given the increased violence associated with such behavior. Even the Obama administration has endorsed anti-bullying legislation. However, there are other bullies in the classroom who could do far greater damage to our entire elementary and secondary education system if they are allowed to continue their behavior.

In recent weeks, America's two major teachers unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have used their scare tactics to cause major havoc in two school districts desperate to implement school reform changes so children can learn. In each case, strong individual leaders and parents are challenging the education system in their schools in order to ensure that children have an opportunity to excel and flourish in the classroom. In both cases, as well as elsewhere in this country, they are meeting stiff resistance from teachers unions and their allies.

In Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who ran on improving Chicago's educational system, has recruited at least nine public elementary schools to bypass union rules and regulations in order to lengthen the school day. Because Chicago has less hours of classroom instruction compared to other large cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, Mayor Emanuel promised to provide extra funds to schools and pay teacher bonuses at schools that would lengthen the school day by 90 minutes in order to devote more time to learning. Parents in Chicago strongly supported this proposal. But Chicago's teachers union strongly objected. When the union rejected a proposal to increase teacher pay by two percent in exchange for a longer school day, Mayor Emanuel went directly to teachers, parents and principals with

his proposal. Teachers at these schools voted to waive sections of their union contract in order to participate in Mayor Emanuel's longer school day program. Chicago's teachers union reacted by playing the bully and filed a complaint with the Illinois Educational Relations Board as well as publicly questioned Mayor Emanuel's tactics in order to stop his proposal.

Mayor Emanuel wants to improve Chicago's public schools. While campaigning for mayor, he also supported a state bill to make it easier to terminate bad teachers and make it harder for teachers to strike. Even Mayor Emanuel, a lifelong Democrat significantly responsible for the Democrat majority takeover of the House of Representatives in 2006 and President Obama's first chief of staff, now finds he is on the opposite side of Chicago's major teachers union. The Chicago teachers union views Mayor Emanuel's proposal as an attack on them rather than a helpful tool to increase student academic performance in Chicago's public schools. Not surprisingly, this teachers union has put its interests ahead of students and parents.

In Compton, California, parents are challenging the California teachers union, one of the strongest in the nation. Under California law, a majority of parents whose children attend a persistently low performing school can sign a petition to force the school to change into a charter school, replace the principal and teachers, or close completely. This is called a *parent trigger* allowing parents to come together in order to change the administration of their failing school. Several states have adopted similar legislation and teachers unions have strongly opposed it. In Compton, California, when 51 percent of parents successfully signed a petition to replace McKinley Elementary School with a charter school, their petition was challenged in court where it remains today demonstrating the enormous barriers parents and supporters of educational reform have when trying to change a failing school.

Now, President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan have announced that they will waive major provisions of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act if states submit to their vision of education reform. While I do not believe that the Obama administration has the legal authority to grant such waivers, this policy will be used to bully states into adopting their federal education mandates in the name of state's rights and flexibility. And states are so fed up with NCLB that they will agree to anything in order to be free of the NCLB accountability requirements.

A closer look at the Obama administration's waiver proposal, however, reveals more federal control, not less. According to the Department of Education's materials describing this waiver policy, states must adopt college and career-ready standards approved by the Department of Education; establish a differentiated school recognition, accountability, and

support system based on progress towards meeting the college and career-ready standards; recognize the highest achieving schools as “Reward Schools”; implement interventions in the lowest performing five percent of schools; identify an additional ten percent of schools struggling with low graduation rates, low performance for specific subgroups of students, or high academic achievement gaps; and, develop teacher evaluation systems that contain at least three different categories, with student growth being a significant factor. If states do not agree to do all of these things then they will not receive a waiver.

If this is not an unlawful federal takeover of our elementary and secondary education system, then I don’t know what is. Indeed, states may find these federal mandates more egregious and over-bearing than the current NCLB accountability requirements. I suspect many states will not qualify for these waivers particularly if they have to adopt new teacher evaluations based on student performance. Such policies have been strongly opposed by the national teachers unions in the past. This happened most recently in the District of Columbia where teachers unions used strong arm bullying tactics to defeat Mayor Adrian Fenty because his school superintendent, Michelle Rhee, implemented such evaluations.

And while the NEA and AFT currently support President Obama’s waiver policy, it will be interesting to see how long they will continue to do so once the first states submit new performance-based teacher evaluations. I suspect their bullying natures will return in full force albeit behind the scenes.

Unfortunately, parents and students are the ones most hurt by this Administration’s bullying tactics. Nowhere in the Obama administration’s waiver proposal are there provisions to strengthen parental choice to ensure that children can transfer to a better performing school or receive extra tutorial help after school. In fact, it is highly likely that states and school districts will request waivers from the current NCLB choice provisions. If granted, these waivers will ensure that parents whose children attend persistently failing schools are stuck in those schools with no options to attend a higher performing public or charter school. For the majority of American children (those not attending schools in the worse performing five percent), the NCLB accountability and school choice provisions will not apply at all. This is truly a victory for teachers unions and the education establishment.

Congressional lawmakers, regardless of political party, need to challenge the Obama administration’s NCLB waivers. Members of Congress should not be lulled into believing that such waivers are a means for more flexibility and less federal control. That is a ruse. These waivers are a direct attempt by the Obama administration to take over our public elementary and secondary schools with more federal mandates, not less. Bypassing the Congress is the ultimate bullying tactic repeatedly practiced by this Administration which Congress must confront and stop immediately.

Too often such bullying methods work by discouraging individuals to stand up for themselves. However, in Chicago, Illinois and Compton, California, parents, teachers, principals and a mayor are standing up to these bullies and fighting them straight on. This is happening in schools and states all over the United States.

When will our national policy makers stand up to President Obama and Secretary Duncan and stop their bullying before it results in tragic education results for our nation's children?