



Teachers Unions Are Out of Step With Student Needs, Financial Realities

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Public employee unionists are on the march in Wisconsin in response to newly elected Gov. Scott Walker's proposal to cut costs by reducing pension obligations, asking public employees to pay a share of health care that remains well below what private employees bear, and limiting collective bargaining rights.

He is asking public employees to chip in 5.8 percent of their salaries to their pensions, which according to a recent report by the National Education Association, is consistent with what public-sector employees in other states pay for retirement. The median percent of salary paid by public employees around the country is 6 percent.

Ironically, even as the turmoil was building, President Obama's Secretary of Education Arne Duncan held a two-day conference in Denver last week on Labor-Management Collaboration at which 150 school districts representing 40 states were in attendance.

Participation at this conference required superintendents, school board presidents and teacher union leaders to sign an agreement to do their best to try to work together. Participants from New York City, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., cancelled attending at the last minute because of disagreements. Interestingly, in light of recent events, districts in Indiana and Tennessee were present, though Idaho and Wisconsin were not.

Obama and Duncan have pursued some education reform initiatives — differentiated teacher pay and tying pay to student test results — that are unpopular among unions. Nevertheless, the Obama administration continues its political agenda by saying one thing and doing another, and even coming out in support of the Wisconsin teachers unions.

“Union leaders and administrators across the country are finding new ways to work together to focus on student success,” Duncan said at the Denver conference. “The leaders from these 150 districts are committed to bold reforms and are showing the country what is possible when adults come together, particularly in tough times, to do the right thing for kids.”

But are union leaders really doing the right thing for kids? They are often against alternative teacher credentialing and flexibility in hiring and firing teachers, which allow for better recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers.

They support reforms like smaller classrooms, which have not been shown to make significant improvements to student performance. Teachers unions want more money and smaller classrooms and usually blame social issues like poverty as the main culprit in preventing educational attainment.

Vouchers are vehemently opposed by the teachers unions. Millions were spent in Utah in 2007 to repeal a voucher law passed by the legislature. Even Democratic Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called the

local teachers union the “one unwavering roadblock to reform.”

And what does the public think of teachers unions? One poll conducted by Resurgent Republic found, in a focus group with small-business owners and female voters about last year’s budget debate in New Jersey, that:

“Even many of those who didn’t approve of Gov. Chris Christie’s policies said they respected him for ‘making tough decisions’ and understood that state government ‘is out of money.’ Conversely, the teachers unions were viewed with disdain and seen as unwilling to help solve the problem, while teachers themselves had a favorable image.”

Around the globe, many countries are outperforming the U.S. education system. Not surprisingly, in places like Japan and South Korea, teachers unions are less powerful because parents and the public oppose their non-education-related political activities.

Similar proposals are being considered in Tennessee, Indiana, Idaho and New Jersey for good reason. Teachers unions are outdated and have held a powerful monopoly over the representation of teachers for far too long.

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