



Insight

Teacher Unions – Out of Touch with American Values

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Watching the events unfold in Chicago brings to the forefront how out of touch teacher unions truly are with what our students need to be competitive in today's global economy. The primary concerns of Chicago's striking teachers are not about demanding additional resources and tools so that they can be more effective in the classroom. On the contrary, Chicago's striking teachers want to maintain the status quo which rewards teachers based on seniority, not performance, returns teachers to the classroom who have been laid off, and relies on an evaluation system that rates 99.7% of Chicago's teachers as satisfactory. No private company could survive under such conditions and would certainly declare bankruptcy. Don't our children deserve better?

Chicago's teachers are some of the highest paid teachers in the country averaging over \$70,000 per year. In fact, the union and the school district agreed early to offer raises to teachers in their new contract. Pay is not an issue for the striking teachers. Yet parents in Chicago should question whether such raises are justified given the status of student performance, especially among minority children, in Chicago's public schools. If 99.7 percent of Chicago's teachers are ranked as satisfactory based on the current evaluation system why are so few of Chicago's students proficient in reading and math? If Chicago's teachers are so outstanding, why is the high school graduation rate only 60 percent? These deploring statistics are the reason why Mayor Emmanuel made reforming Chicago's public schools a top priority in his campaign.

A teacher's job is to teach children the academic material they need to know to be competent to be promoted to the next grade level. If students are not performing at grade level, particularly in reading and math, then the teacher should not be rewarded. Teachers who continue to teach while their students consistently fail to perform at grade level and, where interventions have shown no improvement, should no longer be in the classroom. Such teachers should certainly not be considered for rehiring at another school. While poor teachers should be given training, support and mentoring in an effort to improve in the classroom, such assistance should not continue ad infinitum. Yet this is exactly what the Chicago Teachers Union is demanding. Make no mistake; this strike is not about the interests of students. It is about maintaining job security with no accountability for teachers.

Unfortunately, Chicago is not the only place where teacher unions are resisting education reform efforts. In California, the teacher union has asked the state legislature to overturn a Los Angeles court order requiring the school district to include student performance in teacher evaluations. As Superior Court Judge James Chalfant noted in his opinion, "*Something is amiss when 99.3% of teachers receive the highest grade on their evaluations, but only 46% of students score proficient on language arts state tests.*" The California State

Assembly recently passed a bill to make teacher evaluations solely based on collective bargaining and it is currently pending before the State Senate.

Also in California, a local school board is defying a court order allowing parental triggers to force change at consistently failing schools. Interestingly, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, led by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Los Angeles and Mayor Kevin Johnson of Sacramento, both California Democrats, unanimously supported parent triggers in an effort for parents to take control of their local schools if they failed to increase student academic performance.

It is not unreasonable for parents, students and taxpayers to demand that our teachers ensure that all students, not just those in affluent school districts, are reading, writing, solving mathematical problems and understanding scientific equations at grade level. In fact, it is a crime that only one-third of our nation's students are proficient in math and reading according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). It is not an easy task and teaching is not an easy profession, but teacher performance based on increased student performance should be the basis for how teachers are evaluated, not longevity. In almost any other profession, job performance far outweighs seniority when determining pay increases and bonuses.

Reforming education is not a novelty. We have been trying to increase student performance and close the achievement gap since the nation was stunned by the findings of "A Nation at Risk" published over three decades ago. Yet in each phase of the reform movement, teacher unions have vehemently opposed leaders who have sought to replace our antiquated system. In the past, teacher unions could rely on Democrats to support their positions with little resistance. Today that is changing as more and more reform-oriented Democrats challenge entrenched teacher unions because so many of their constituents are demanding better academic results for their children.

Chicago was once a leader in the early days of education reform when Paul Vallas was appointed by Mayor Richard Daley as the new CEO of Chicago's public schools in 1995. Mr. Vallas, a former city budget director, instituted reforms based on the academic performance of students in reading, writing and math. Students who did not perform were not promoted to the next grade and other public school options, such as charter and magnet schools, were available to parents.

In 2012, our political leaders must resist teacher union's demands to put their jobs over student success. If they do, major victories will be won for parents, students and taxpayers who want academic accountability in the classroom. If they don't, school reform efforts, especially in urban areas dominated by strong teacher unions, will suffer major setbacks that may be difficult to reverse.