

WHERE WE STAND



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The Missing Story . . .

School Change Is Union Made

During the last five years, the press has missed a very big story—a revolutionary change in union-school board relationships in a number of school districts. Had similar changes taken place in any other “industry,” it would have been front page news. Why not in education? Because most news coverage of schools is done by education reporters and editors who emphasize the *educational* aspects of change . . . as they should. But it’s about time labor reporters and editors got into the act because a large number of the exciting changes in labor relations today are happening in schools.

Few people realize that public school employees are the most unionized part of the American workforce. About 85-90 percent of the nation’s 2.4 million teachers are unionized. Even so, there are a number of states, especially in the South, where teacher unions are relatively weak and where they are still denied collective-bargaining rights.

The last five years have been times of change and reform for our schools. If you accept the widespread negative view of unions, you would expect the greatest changes to have taken place in those districts where unions are non-existent or weakest. Many would proclaim that little or no change could take place where unions are big and powerful—at least not without a bloody battle. Indeed, U.S. Education Secretary William Bennett constantly played on this stereotype of unions when he kept warning that teacher unions were standing in the way of reform.

But what has actually happened? What’s been missed by the labor press? That the most fundamental education and labor-management reforms are taking place in strong unionized school districts. Rochester, Syracuse, Dade County, Pittsburgh, New York City, Minneapolis, Toledo, Hammond, Cincinnati and others are American Federation of Teachers strongholds in which the union has not resisted change but, together with innovative school superintendents, provided leadership for major reform. Where is the list of comparable non-union districts? The moral is that teachers with a strong union are willing to take chances and make changes that teachers without union protection will understandably resist.

Of course, this has not happened everywhere. Why it’s happening becomes clear when you take a close look at what these teacher union leaders are doing at the local level. Let’s just look at one, Albert Fondy, President of the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers. I have previously written about Pittsburgh’s non-adversarial bargaining, which has resulted both in great improvement in benefits and widespread teacher union-school district partnerships in school improvement. Now I’d like to share parts of Fondy’s “Statement of Union Philosophy and Objectives”:

“Collectively employed professionals . . . require a collective organization to represent them as a group and as individuals, as well as to represent their profession. That collective organization, of course, is a union—a professional union.

“A union must always conscientiously and scrupulously fulfill its fundamental responsibility to represent and service its members. . . . At the same time, a union is not conceived with the primary mission of protecting the least competent of its members. It certainly is not designed to defend incompetence or non-performance of duties. A union cannot function, or be perceived, in so restricted a perspective. . . .

“A union must be consistent and vigilant in its objective observance of management . . . and, if warranted, in direct challenges to management initiatives or inactions. But, much more important, a union must also work constructively and cooperatively with management—and do so at a level of equal stature and mutual respect.

“A union shares the responsibility for assuring the effectiveness, stability, and long-term viability and success of the institution or enterprise in which its members are employed. . . . Not only does fulfillment of this basic union tenet best serve the clients of the union’s members as well as best serve our society . . . but also it best serves the interests and career well-being of the union members. . . .

“Collective bargaining has brought power to teachers unions and, therefore, to teachers. When a teachers union . . . achieves strength and influence, it also acquires clear and inescapable responsibilities, including the fundamental responsibility to attain and maintain the most effective teaching performance and learning results that can be achieved for the students whom teachers serve. . . .

“As union leaders we must not allow ourselves to be politically and intellectually lazy . . . by just taking the easy course of criticizing or attacking management, bemoaning problems and difficulties, and following similar unimaginative, negative, and unproductive courses of action. . . . Leaders must be willing to take internal political risks, if necessary, to strengthen the enterprise in which the members work, to improve the quality of the services which members provide to their clientele, and to stabilize and build the union. . . .

“Schools are of paramount significance to young people, to parents, to the public, to society and our social structure, to the economy, to national strength, and to international competitiveness. . . . The vastly changed home and family structure today can properly be viewed as a severe problem and a handicap to the schools. Actually, this reality makes schools even more necessary, more critical, and more indispensable to our society than in the past. We cannot point to existing social problems and use them as excuses for an inability to succeed. . . .

“Teachers and other professionals and non-professionals in the schools, and their unions, must be advocates for effectiveness and performance and for educationally sound productivity.”

Maybe it’s time to start questioning the old union stereotype and start telling the public that the most exciting changes in American education are union made.