



Unions vs. Children

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By and large, teachers are wonderful people who dedicate their lives to helping children achieve their full potential. Their unions, by contrast, have a very different mission.

Take the Great Chicago Library Lockout of 2017, for example. As a parent recently described in the *Wall Street Journal*, Pritzker Elementary in Chicago had to lay off its librarian due to a combination of budget cuts and lower-than-expected enrollment, so parents volunteered to help out to keep the library open. According to Michael Hendershot, whose daughter attends Pritzker, “There was so much interest that the parent-teacher organization created a rotating schedule of regular volunteers to help out.” That’s when the Chicago Teachers Union (and affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers) intervened:

But before parents could begin volunteering, a teachers union member filed a formal complaint with the school system, objecting to the parents’ plan. Several weeks later, a union representative appeared at a local school council meeting and informed parents that the union would not stand for parental volunteers in the library. Although the parents intended to do nothing more than help students check books in and out, the union claimed that the parents would be impermissibly filling a role reserved for teachers. The volunteer project was shut down following the meeting and the library is currently being used for dance classes.

Noting that Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently declared that “we have an obligation to all children in America,” Henderson expressed the anger and bewilderment that many Pritzker parents are feeling:

The Chicago union’s actions do not match Ms. Weingarten’s rhetoric. How does forcing the closure of an elementary school library square with the union’s stated mission of fighting for children? How does opposing parents who want to volunteer their time so that children can check out books constitute giving parents the voice they need?

The parents are understandably angry, but they shouldn’t be bewildered. As Professor Terry Moe of Stanford University explained in his book, “Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools,” the union’s main purpose is to protect adult jobs, not advance the interests of children, and the policies they push reflect this. Moe explains:

Almost everywhere, in districts throughout the nation, America's public schools are typically not organized to provide the nation's children with the highest quality education.

One example: salary schedules that pay teachers based on their seniority and formal credits and have nothing whatever to do with whether their students are learning anything. Another example: rules that give senior teachers their choice of jobs and make it impossible for districts to allocate teachers where they can do the greatest good for kids. Another example: rules that require districts to lay off teachers (in times of reduced revenues or enrollments, say) in reverse order of seniority, thus ensuring that excellent teachers will be automatically fired if they happen to have little seniority and that lousy teachers will be automatically retained if they happen to have lots of seniority.

These sorts of rules are common. But who in their right mind, if they were organizing the schools for the benefit of children, would organize them in this way? No one would. Yet the schools do get organized in this way. The examples I've given are the tip of a very large iceberg. As a result, even the most obvious steps toward better education are difficult, if not impossible, to take.

The rules the unions push often constrain teachers who want to do what's best for their students. Jonathan Butcher of the Goldwater Institute recently highlighted an example of this all-too-common phenomenon in a review of Ed Boland's book, *The Battle for Room 314*:

Room 314 is a memoir, not a policy guide, even though Boland offers recommendations in the book's conclusion. The author is a 40-something New Yorker who leaves his successful career in fundraising to teach in a New York City public school. He gives an account of his year spent trying to make sense of American teenagers with absent or unstable parents. Boland leaves little to the imagination and tells the story with the same salty language that his students use in class. Be warned, it's brutal and explicit storytelling at times.

Because this is a book about public schools, Boland's personal story cannot help but expose familiar policy problems. Halfway through the school year, Boland and his fellow ninth grade teachers plan to reconfigure the classrooms to break up the most disruptive students. The teachers agree to teach an extra period.

Enter the union. The representative says, "If management sees that teachers are willing to work more without more compensation, they'll hold that against us during the next round of negotiations... We have to adhere to the contract strictly or the whole thing falls apart." Boland says his class has already fallen apart.

It's no wonder, then, that some teachers want out of their unions. Unfortunately, about half the states force district-school teachers either to join a union or pay "agency fees" that are often nearly as expensive as dues, but without the benefits. Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court considered the case of ten teachers who challenged the constitutionality of the statute. They argued that forcing them to pay the unions to bargain (supposedly) on their behalf was violated their First Amendment right to free speech, which includes the right *not* to speak, because collective bargaining with the government is inherently political. Sadly, with Justice Antonin Scalia's untimely passing, SCOTUS was divided 4-4, so the law still stands.

In the coming year, we will likely see further legal challenges and legislative efforts to help unshackle teachers, giving them greater freedom and flexibility to help kids achieve their potential. We will also see many initiatives to expand educational choice, empowering parents to choose the learning environments that work best for their kids—and leave ones where bureaucrats and unions put their own interests before the children.

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