

Two Thoughts on Education This Week: Democrats Wag the NEA Dog

An Inconvenient Fact: Beltway reformers are lauding the National Education Association's move earlier this week to ditch some of its opposition to subjecting teachers to performance-based evaluations. But **Dropout Nation** isn't all that impressed. The nation's largest teachers union still opposes the use of standardized testing in teacher performance management (which it strenuously opposes), still defends near-lifetime employment rules and seniority-based privileges that lead to laggard instructors getting the same pay and benefits as good-to-great counterparts, advocates for reverse seniority layoff rules that lead to quality-blind decisions that keep our poorest kids from receiving high-quality instruction, and opposes any effort to reform the ineffective and expensive traditional system of teacher compensation. So its move on the teacher evaluation front is little more than an effort to triangulate reformers while keeping the status quo in place.

What has been interesting is the NEA's tacit acknowledgement of its changing fortunes. For those who haven't been paying much attention to the game, the move by the union's delegates this week to endorse President Barack Obama a year earlier than it had to — and by a 72 percent-to-28 percent margin — is amazing given the union's steadfast opposition of the president's education reform agenda (and its condemnation of Obama's U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan). But not really. With school reformers have captured control of the education policy agenda both at the federal level and, to a lesser extent, in many of the nation's Democrat-controlled statehouses, the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers can no longer count on the party's unquestioned support. And with Democrat-controlled states facing the brunt of budget shortfalls, and \$1.1 trillion worth of deficits in teacher and public-sector worker pensions, Democrats can no longer avoid dealing with the much-needed reform of costly, ineffective traditional teachers compensation regimes. Actions such as those in New Jersey, where the Democrat-controlled legislature teamed up with Republican Gov. Chris Christie last month on [enacting a series](#) of modest cutbacks, will become more common.

NEA affiliates could punish Democrats by withholding their campaign dollars and bodies of rank-and-file members. But that is based on the theory that they can help win elections. As proven in last year's congressional elections, NEA and AFT dollars don't necessarily equal success for Democrats at the ballot box. The fact that Obama won the Democratic nomination three years ago with almost no NEA and AFT support also proves this reality. And given the NEA's tendency to not reach across the aisle to support Republicans at the federal level, the union has even fewer levers of influence than ever.

The NEA is now stuck in a marriage of inconvenience with a Democratic party that knows it will get support from the union regardless of what they do on federal education policy. This means that the union is stuck arguing for a [failed, amoral vision of education](#) that has no broad support in political circles. And that school reformers have more opportunities to push further for reform.

When the Libertarian School Reformers Fail to Think: Yesterday's [Voices of the Dropout Nation](#) piece by Sandy Kress chastising Cato Institute's education czar Andrew Coulson definitely got the latter's attention. What Coulson [proceeds](#) to do this morning was incorrectly spell your editor's name (it's a capital "S" as it is on the birth certificate, but nice try), and offer a weak retort that essentially argues that No Child was an expensive and useless piece of federal legislation. Coulson didn't offer much in the way of examples to prove this point. But he declared that my introduction to Kress' piece didn't offer any evidence that No Child has been responsible for creating the conditions that have led to the advancement of choice.

I've written about this matter ad nauseam, especially in a piece in March on [harnessing the disruptive power of school data](#). But here's the Cliff Notes version. The impact of No Child on advancing choice (along with other systemic reforms) starts with the law's Adequate Yearly Progress requirements. Thanks to the data culled, the low quality of education in traditional district schools was exposed for all to see, providing parents and school choice activists with the information they needed to push for the advancement of choice. The law also exposed the long-running gamesmanship by states looking to define proficiency downward (a fact

that Cato has used to its own advantage in arguing against expanding federal education policy); this, in turn, has rallied more reformers to move toward advancing school choice.

The law's focus on graduation rates led to research by scholars such as Michael Holzman, Robert Balfanz, Jay P. Greene and Christopher Swanson that exposed the reality that most states were inflating their numbers, failing to deal with the reality that far too many young men and women were dropping out of school and dropping into poverty and prison. The research by these scholars, along with exposes by publications such as [The Indianapolis Star](#) and *Time* forced states to present realistic numbers that school reformers — including choice activists — have used to advocate for their own solutions.

Essentially No Child has led to the amassing of data needed to foster the political climate conducive to pushing for systemic reforms — including the embrace of school choice and the development of Parent Trigger laws. Its choice provisions, unsuccessful as they were, have also forced a national conversation on developing the tools needed to give parents the ability to get their kids out of dropout factories. Without No Child, there is no Race to the Top, which forced states such as New York to allow for the expansion of charter schools. And without No Child, school choice activists in 13 states wouldn't have succeeded in creating new voucher programs and tax credit deals, or in expanding existing initiatives.

This isn't to say that No Child is perfect (last week's [Dropout Nation Podcast](#) made that clear). Nor am I saying that a strong federal role in education is a wonderful thing. As a small-L libertarian (you know, the first-principles-as-guide kind, not the dogmatic big-L crowd), I'm look at federal education policy as more of a necessary evil; after all, school districts are subsidized by federal dollars, and we must remember that education is a critical reason behind the nation's economic malaise. But you cannot ignore No Child's positive impact on advancing school reform overall, and school choice in particular.

Of course, Coulson and his team will not be impressed by any of this. They are unwilling to seeing the connections between policymaking and advocacy, and how a law can actually foster the conditions that allow reformers to move the needle on their efforts. More importantly, they are caught up in dogma. As with so many reformers, the Coulson gang are more-interested in touting their one silver bullet instead of accepting the reality that it will take numerous solutions to address the nation's education crisis. Their argument that choice alone is the only solution fails to consider the fact that parents — especially those in poor and minority communities — need high-quality data and advice on school options in order to make the best decisions for their children. Their general response to that point — that robust data systems cannot happen until we get free market choice — ignores the important role that federal policy has already played in forcing states to offer more-accurate data.

But the emphasis on the silver bullet is just one problem. The other problem is that Coulson and company are far more concerned with ideological purity — that is, school choice options must be closest to their free market ideals — than with providing families with an array of options that are steps closer to their ideal. As a result, Coulson and company find themselves both arguing against *and* for school choice. For example, Coulson's team spent much of this year [denigrating vouchers](#) in favor of tax credit plans because the former no longer dovetails with their worldview; they ignore the success of existing voucher plans such as those in Milwaukee and in Florida while ignoring the fiscal problems of tax credit plans. Coulson particularly abhors charter schools, the most-successful form of school choice (both in terms of improving student achievement and offering options for parents to escape the worst that American public education offers) because they also don't fit into his vision of what choice should look like.

This pursuit of the silver bullet and obsession over school choice purity hasn't served Coulson or Cato well. It has relegated Cato to the sidelines in education policy and advocacy discussions, rendering it incapable of offering cohesive and coherent strategies that can actually advance school choice and lead to systemic reform. More importantly, it cannot offer strategies that would move the nation closer to a system of education where all parents can actually choose from an array of high-quality school options. And because Coulson is less-interested in offering practical steps than in speechifying, his team cannot embark on practical steps such as creating guides and databases on school performance that would provide parents data they can use to support efforts to expand school choice.

Although Coulson's rant gives me a chance to fill up today's [Three Thoughts](#) with some fodder, I take no pleasure in noting all of this. I admire the work Coulson and his team have done in advancing the philosophical arguments for school choice. As a libertarian (albeit a less-than-doctrinaire sort), I want to see Cato play a more-prominent role in the education reform arena. But Coulson and his team have to do more

than offer one pure silver bullet. They need to play a more-thoughtful, less-dogmatic role in the education policy arena if they want to advance school choice.