

April 20, 2012

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## *Are Democrats Wrong to Blame Teachers Unions?*

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Posted: 04/20/2012 12:17 pm

In a leaked email, Seattle venture capitalist Nick Hanauer [called](#) the leadership of the Democratic party and most of its elected members "stooges for the teachers unions," blaming those unions for "strangling our public schools to death with an almost infinite number of institutional rules that limit change, innovation and excellence." Typical "Rethuglican" vitriol? Not so much. Hanauer is one of the biggest Democratic donors in Washington state.

A growing Democratic vanguard faults the teachers' unions for much of what's wrong with our schools. According to Hanauer, "Even other unions, in private, will admit that the teachers make all unions look bad because they are so obviously counterproductive and self-interested." But aren't unions supposed to represent their members' interests? Hanauer acknowledges as much, writing that he is "a huge supporter of unions" because they "balance the interests of capitalists" by representing the interests of workers.

So if teachers unions have the same agenda as other unions, why single them out for attack? Hanauer says it's because "90% of what is in most teacher contracts is self-destructive [expletive] designed to protect the adults with the most seniority and the least ability." But again, iron-clad job security is a prize sought by every union. And since all members pay dues, regardless of ability, a union is duty-bound to protect them all. Unions do not -- and are not meant to -- represent the interests of customers. They represent their dues-paying members and seek to grow that membership.

What really upsets education reform Democrats is that the teachers unions are too successful. Roughly 70 percent of public school employees are unionized, compared to only 7 percent of private sector workers. Public school employment has grown 10 times faster than enrollment for 40 years. Public school teachers' annual compensation is \$17,000 higher than that of private sector teachers, on average. And public school teachers are seldom fired for poor performance, contrary to the norm in other fields.

Meanwhile, high school student achievement has stagnated or declined since nationally representative testing began around 1970.

But why are teachers unions so much more successful than other unions? The answer is simple: public schools lack both competitors and paying customers, eliminating the checks and balances on union demands that exist in the private sector. A business whose unionized workers drive up costs without raising quality loses customers and may have to lay off workers or even shut down. Union success is thus self-regulating. But if, as a parent, you don't like the way your local district runs its schools, you have nowhere else to turn -- not without moving or paying for a private school. And as a taxpayer, if your local schools mismanage your tax dollars, you can't send those dollars anywhere else. That's why public schooling's inflation-adjusted per-pupil spending has more than doubled in the past four decades despite stagnating or declining academic outcomes: revenues don't depend on satisfying customers.

That's not the unions' fault. It is the natural result of operating K-12 education as a fully state-funded monopoly. That, however, may explain why education-reform Democrats so often blame the unions instead. Acknowledging the real root of the problem -- state school monopolies -- seems like an attack on government or even on the ideal of universal education.

But it is not an attack on government to observe that government is bad at running schools, anymore than it's an attack on shovels to note that they make lousy Web browsers. No single tool can do every job. Nor is it an attack on the ideals of public education to say that state monopolies are an ineffective way to pursue them. That's a confusion of ends and means. Public education is not a particular pile of bricks or stack of regulations, it is a set of goals: universal access, preparation for participation in public life as well as success in private life, building harmony and understanding among communities.

If the true allegiance of reformist Democrats is to those ultimate ideals, then they should have no problem acknowledging that government monopolies are ill-suited to advancing them, and that teachers-union excesses are more a symptom than a cause of our monopoly-induced woes. Finding the best policies for advancing our educational ideals then becomes a practical, tractable problem. The participation of reformist Democrats in solving it will be a tremendous boon to the children they seek to help.

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