

A FURTHER PERSPECTIVE

Second Front Alliances

By RiShawn Biddle on 12.22.10 @ 6:07AM

For President Barack Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, incoming House Education and Labor Committee Chairman John Kline will likely be as much a thorn in their school reform efforts as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. The suburban Minnesota congressman has already made it clear that he will oppose additional funding for Race to the Top, the \$4.3 billion initiative that has spurred states such as California, Michigan, and Massachusetts to eliminate restrictions on the expansion of charter schools and on the use of student test score data in evaluating teachers. Kline is also pushing to eliminate the accountability provisions within the No Child Left Behind Act -- a fact that pleases the nation's two largest teachers' unions and suburban districts embarrassed by revelations of their academic mediocrity.

Nonetheless, Obama and Duncan will have some unlikely allies in Republican governors Mitch Daniels of Indiana, tough-talking Chris Christie of New Jersey, and newly elected Rick Scott of Florida. These governors share common cause with the president on challenging teachers unions and their fellow defenders of traditional public education. This, in turn, highlights the disagreement on education policy (and school reform) in GOP ranks, one that is as wide as that between centrist reformers and teachers unions within Democratic Party ranks.

Certainly Obama and Republican governors will square off on other issues. Daniels is considered a possible (if longshot) candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. Along with their allies in Republican-controlled legislatures, they will also gerrymander congressional districts in order to ensure a Republican majority in the federal lower house for years to come, leaving Obama with less of a network to draw on in his own re-election efforts.

But when it comes to school reform, the administration and the governors share similar playbooks. If anything, Obama's sly (if not always successful) approach to federal education spending -- along with the use of bully pulpits -- has helped Republican governors make their own school reform proposals stick.

In Indiana, Daniels and the state's Superintendent for Public Instruction, Tony Bennett,

have already spent the last two years beating back the state's once-powerful National Education Association affiliate to pass a series of teacher quality reforms that include expanding the number of alternative teacher training programs and requiring aspiring teachers to pass a test before taking education school courses. Daniels and Bennett particularly used the lure of Race to the Top to their advantage in 2009, stopping an effort by the NEA essentially to cut off funding to charter schools.

Now, with the Republicans gaining full control of the state legislature, Daniels and Bennett are pushing through a 20-point agenda that includes the creation of a charter school board that will authorize more of the publicly-funded, privately-operated schools. They are also looking to ditch the Hoosier State's arcane school funding formula for something called "weighted student funding." It could end the practice of restricting students to a school in their particular neighborhood -- and even pave the way for school vouchers -- by allowing state education dollars (which now account for nearly all of operating funds for Indiana's schools) to follow the student to whatever school he attends.

In New Jersey, Christie has spent the past year successfully beating back the state's bellicose NEA affiliate over his effort to require teachers to contribute a modest 1.5 percent to their pensions funds, and has helped rally taxpayers to vote against increases in local school district budgets. Christie is now looking to bring private sector-style performance management to education by reforming how teachers are evaluated and ending near-lifetime job protections. He's getting help from a Democrat-controlled state legislature more willing to turn its back on the Democratic Party's teacher union allies.

The most-intriguing work may come out of Florida, where two decades of reforms begun under Lawton Chiles and Jeb Bush will now be taken further by Scott. This will likely include the revival of efforts to abolish tenure, the work status that has made teaching a near-lifetime job at the expense of both students (who must put up with laggard teachers who can't be easily removed from their jobs) and taxpayers (who pick up the tab for lousy work). Scott's predecessor, Charlie Crist, vetoed such a similar Race to the Top-inspired measure earlier this year in order to win over teachers unions, a move that all but ended his wishy-washy career.

Republican governors (and even their Democrat counterparts) have also embraced a measure originally spurred by Race to the Top called Parent Trigger. It allows 51 percent of parents to either replace school principals and teachers with new staff or convert it into a public charter school. In the past year, Parent Trigger laws have been enacted and considered in California and Connecticut to the consternation of school districts and teachers unions alike; similar measures are being proposed next month in 10 more states - - including such teachers union strongholds as Pennsylvania and Michigan.

All of these reforms challenge the concept of local control of education by school district bureaucracies championed by Kline and some of his fellow congressional Republicans. From where they sit -- and as championed by think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute -- No Child, Race to the Top and other expansions of federal education policy championed by Obama and predecessors George W. Bush and Bill Clinton are overreach. In their minds, reform efforts will best be accomplished in local

school districts and the communities they serve.

The fact that districts, along with the NEA and AFT, are the most-obstinate opponents of the school choice and teacher quality reforms they support never factors into their thinking. They also remain silent when it is noted that other Republicans are talking about reviving the now-defunct D.C. Opportunity school voucher program, a federal program launched in the last decade by another generation of congressional Republicans. (No Child, by the way, is also a Republican party creation.)

Meanwhile Kline and his allies fail to realize that for all but a few Republican governors, federal education policy hasn't exactly been all that burdensome. If anything, No Child has helped force states to accept their full responsibility for America's public school systems.

Although education is perceived as a local concern, schools and districts (along with busted teacher pensions) are actually creations of state constitutions. Although state governments played passive roles for most of the 20th century, that has changed since the 1960s, when teachers unions successfully lobbied for state laws requiring districts to sit at the bargaining table and states became the main forces in shaping school policymaking. This role expanded in the 1970s as school funding equity lawsuits and property tax reforms such as California's Proposition 13 led states to pick up larger portions of the school funding tab.

These days, state governments account for 48 percent of education spending. But the heft of the NEA and AFT, with their vast campaign coffers and rank-and-file numbers, and the clout of local districts have made it difficult to enact any school reform or choice measure. This has led reform-minded governors to look to the federal government, which has had a more prominent role in public education -- from the formation of land grant universities in the 19th century, to the Sputnik-inspired National Defense Education Act of 1958 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act -- than most actually realize.

For GOP governors and school reformers in both parties, school reform is no longer a matter of philosophical difference. Particularly for GOP governors in Rust Belt states, overhauling public schools is part of efforts to foster economic development and eliminate the drag of long-term unemployment. As a result, the governors are more than willing to team up with Obama, big-city mayors, centrist Democrats, and conservative think tanks outside of the Heritage-Cato axis to advance a more-expansive federal education policy. Kline will find a few governors tapping on his shoulders before he bangs his gavel.

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