

A FURTHER PERSPECTIVETeachers Union Spending Spree

By RiShawn Biddle on 1.29.10 @ 6:06AM

For President Barack Obama, Scott Brown's victory over Martha Coakley in the U.S. Senate special election could at the very least lead to a drastically scaled-down version of his healthcare reform plan. But for the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and suburban school districts, it may mean at least \$27 billion and perhaps, even more.

Even as Obama proclaims he has listened to voter discontent by freezing some domestic spending, the president made sure to assure teachers unions (along with school districts and the school reform movement) that more federal money would flow into their coffers. This includes his announcement in his State of the Union address of a \$4 billion increase in Title I funding as well as another \$1.5 billion for the federal Race to the Top school reform effort.

Skeptics of federal education policy aren't fooled. Declares Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute: "[Obama will] be driving this country deeper into debt for no good reason at all... unless of course you consider swelling the ranks of the public school employee unions a good reason."

But the spending spree -- and the catering to the NEA and AFT -- isn't likely to stop with a few lousy federal ducats. Even before Coakley, the allegedly prosecutorial misconduct-prone Massachusetts attorney general, plunged into a series of gaffes that gave the Massachusetts state senator the election, House Democrats were considering a new round of stimulus subsidies. The highlight of this scheme: A plan to ladle \$23 billion into school districts in order to keep their teachers on the payroll. This would be on top of \$70 billion in so-called "state fiscal stabilization" funds poured into state and school district coffers last year. But centrist Democrats in the Senate such as Evan Bayh of Indiana put the kibosh on the new plan.

Since then, Democrats have seen congressional incumbents such as Bryan Dorgan and Christopher Dodd (along with governors such as Colorado's Bill Ritter) throw in their towels for this year's midterm races. Defeats in last year's general election races in New Jersey and Virginia also have Democrats wondering if they can keep their wide congressional majorities. Now there is the defeat in Massachusetts. This, along with other tough congressional, Senate and statehouse races in November, means that Democrats are scrambling to secure all the war chests (and grassroots supporters) within their traditional base of allies.

The NEA and AFT are more than ready to help. After all, their vast campaign war chests (including \$66 million during the 2007-2008 election cycle) and 4.6 million rank-and-file public school employees gives them the kind of electioneering heft that few of the other players within Democratic Party politics -- including school reformers -- can ever muster. The raises their members have received so far, along with the growth in the teaching ranks, have filled their coffers even more. In 2009, the two unions raised \$15 million for the 2010 campaign cycle, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics; this is more than double the amount raised a year before the 2008 elections.

Thanks to last week's U.S. Supreme Court ruling that abolished limits on campaign finance spending by corporations, the NEA and AFT will have an even larger presence. The fact that other issues with which the two unions are concerned -- passage of the Employee Free Choice Act and health care reform -- will also be in play this election season will especially energize much of their rank-and-file. Although the school reform movement has counted on the backing of such big-named philanthropists as Eli Broad and Bill Gates, its advocates have more of a presence inside the Beltway than among grassroots activists. The last campaign by school reformers to foster consensus on its prescriptions -- 2008's "ED in '08" -- petered out well before Election Day.

NEA and AFT affiliates will play a particularly critical role in states such as Pennsylvania and Colorado, where Democrats are defending vulnerable seats held respectively by Arlen Specter and Michael Bennett. The two unions and their affiliates spent \$9.3 million in those two states alone. Although Bennett has been a strong school reformer since his days running Denver's school district, a re-energized GOP, voter dissatisfaction with Obama's healthcare and economic policies, and the lack of a strong incumbent in the gubernatorial race mean that Bennett will take all the help he can get.

But such help comes with a price. The NEA and AFT are particularly annoyed with Obama and his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, over Race to the Top, the \$4.3 billion reform effort that has won qualified praise from school reformers. The dollars, along with the willingness of Obama and Duncan to use their respective bully pulpits, has convinced legislators in states such as California, Michigan and Massachusetts to ignore the entreaties of the two unions and eliminate restrictions on the expansion of charter schools and on the use of student test score data in evaluating teachers. This has forced the two unions to bully school districts -- which have to sign onto the plan -- and use other scorched-earth tactics in order to maintain the status quo.

For the Democrats, the tab starts with the \$23 billion teacher subsidy package. Expect that package to gain passage by April, just before school districts begin drawing up plans to lay off teachers once the first round of stimulus funds runs out. This, by the way, will also benefit congressional Republicans in suburban districts, where opposition to the 16-year string of school reform efforts undertaken by Obama and his predecessors is strongest (and which plays to fears among some in the GOP that school reform is just another phrase for government mandate).

An ever bigger play may come with reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush-era reform of Title I that teachers unions, suburban school districts, and some Republicans alike oppose altogether. Will it be scrapped? Given the strong support for the measure among the motley crew of centrist Democrats, left-leaning civil rights activists, and even otherwise-conservative Republicans -- including newly elected Senator Brown -- not a chance. But at the

very least, No Child may remain in legislative limbo despite Obama's own interest in putting his stamp on the measure.

The biggest piece could come in the next couple of years, as states are forced to reckon with decades of deal-making with teachers unions (and their own fiscal mismanagement) in the form of underfunded pensions and unfunded retiree healthcare liabilities. The battles are already starting to rage in Vermont -- where taxpayers will see a 43 percent increase in payments in order to keep the Green Mountain State's teachers' pensions afloat -- and Pennsylvania. Don't be surprised if Obama calls for a bailout of those pensions if the Democrats succeed in keeping control of Congress. Keeping the NEA and AFT happy is merely a small price for staying in power -- and one that the taxpayers (and children) will be paying in their stead.

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