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Star Parker: Unions, public schools, and minority children

By: STAR PARKER Examiner Columnist March 22, 2010

Speaking a couple years ago about technology and education, Apple CEO and founder Steve Jobs said that technology wouldn't matter as long as you can't fire teachers.

"I believe that what is wrong with our schools in this nation is that they have become unionized in the worst possible way," he said.

Jobs likened schools to running a small business, which he said could never succeed if you can't hire and fire.

Reasonable? I think so. Would anyone question that there is no single thing more critical to a nation's future than educating its children?

Yet, consider that 88 percent of our children get K-12 education in public schools and that 70 percent of the teachers in these schools have union-protected jobs.

Gallup has been polling public opinion about unions since the 1930s. Last year, for the first time, less than half (48 percent) of those surveyed approved of unions. Fifty one percent said unions "mostly hurt" the U.S. economy, and 39 percent said they "mostly help."

The percentage of the nation's private sector work force that belongs to a union has dropped precipitously. In the 1950s, more than 30 percent belonged to unions. Today it's a little over 7 percent.

But in our public schools, the direction is completely opposite. In 1960, about 35 percent of public school teachers belonged to unions, and today it's twice that at 70 percent.

Is it not counterintuitive that most Americans feel unions hurt us, that we allow increasingly fewer goods and services produced in our private sector to be controlled by unions, but we turn increasingly more of our most precious commodity -- our children and their education -- over to a union-controlled work force?

In an article in the latest edition of the Cato Journal, Andrew Coulson notes that, on average, compensation of public school teachers is about 42 percent higher than that of their counterparts teaching in nonunionized private schools. Yet, according to Coulson, research shows that private schools consistently outperform public schools.

He attributes the higher average wages of public school teachers less to union collective bargaining and more to the political clout of unions to maintain the public school monopoly over K-12 education.

Over 95 percent of the political contributions of the two national teachers' unions --

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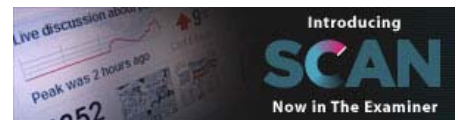
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the National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers -- go to Democrats or to the Democrat Party. Their \$56 million in political contributions since 1989 equals that of "Chevron, Exxon Mobil, Lockheed Martin, and the National Rifle Association combined."

The main beneficiaries of education alternatives are minority children. Yet, at the state level, unions provide a unified lobbying front to block such initiatives.

A recent Wall Street Journal op-ed reported on the glowing success of charter schools in Harlem: "Nationwide the average black 12th grader reads at the level of a white eighth grader. Yet, Harlem charter students ... are outperforming their white peers in wealthy suburbs."


Yet, in 2009, the New York teachers union successfully lobbied the state legislature to freeze charter school spending and now is pushing to limit penetration of charters in school districts.


Kids in Los Angeles' public schools are overwhelmingly Hispanic and black. According to the Los Angeles Times, "just 39% of Los Angeles's fourth-graders are even basically literate." Yet, the Times attributes union lobbying to undermining a recent attempt by the Los Angeles school board to open failing schools to nonunionized charters.

Similarly, unions played a major role in recently killing the successful private school scholarship program in Washington, D.C.

But there's a significant and promising sign that blacks are beginning to fight back. The Rev. James Meeks, founder and senior pastor of the largest black church in Illinois, who is also a Democrat state senator, is taking on the unions. He has introduced a bill opening the door for vouchers for kids in Chicago's public schools.

Examiner Columnist Star Parker is an author, and president of CURE, the Coalition for Urban Renewal and Education (www.urbanecure.org). She is syndicated nationally by Scripps Howard News Service.

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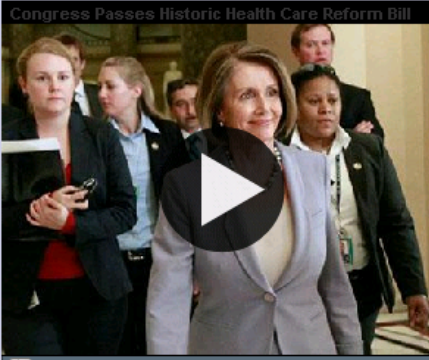
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 **kp** 2 hours ago

I am not a fan of unions, however I think you missed something in your use of Andrew Coulson's

compensation to performance quote. The numbers sound great with your article, but has he really found the key? Private schools pay less yes, in fact, they often use teachers who are not officially accredited. They also have a self selecting population of students. If a student does not perform well in a private school, it is very easy for them to be removed from their population. In the public school, if the child does not do well, they get shuffled into various programs- but, and this is key, they stay in the school.

Another problem with comparing public to private is that you have a population in private schools that is usually very self motivated. At the very least, they are family motivated. These families have sought out a specific educational environment. In public schools, you have motivated families as well as families that are not that into it!

It is just poor journalism, op-edism to use that particular statistic.

Flag



edddoerr 2 hours ago

It's easier for Star Parker to scapegoat teachers amd unions for our schools problems than to tackle the real problems: inadequate and inequitably distributed funding, and widespread poverty and its concomitants. -- As for Illinois state senator Rev James Meeks and his school voucher bill in the legislature, he seems unaware -- 1. That vouchers clearly violate the Illinois constitution; 2. That Americans by the tens of millions have rejected vouchers or anything like them in over 25 statewide referenda from coast to coast by an average margin of two to one; and 3. That black Protestant families in his own Chicago who put their kids in Catholic private schools have complained loudly that their kids were subjected to Catholic religious instruction. Mr Meeks' indifference to these considerations is shocking.

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grouchy1 1 hour ago in reply to edddoerr

Star Parker isn't scapegoating anyone she has a valid opinion which she shares with the rest of us. We have a lot of inept teachers in our school systems, and that creates problems for everyone. A kid cannot receive a quality education until he/she is taught by a quality educator. Unions don't insist on quality they want numbers. I see evidence of this every day on TV people who should know better English don't.

Flag



grouchy1 1 hour ago

I live in Texas and I don't think that we have any union teachers here. We may have but I've not heard of any, and since I have no one involved with education I wouldn't know for certain. I do know this you are very right and it won't get better until we learn to take control of the schools at a local level. The Union keeps incompetent teachers working, and an inept teacher cannot educate anyone.

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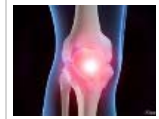
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