



Debating Failing Schools

By Michael Van Beek | March 30, 2010

Are teachers unions to blame for failing schools?

This was the question debated last week on NPR's Intelligence Squared. At the beginning of the debate, less than half the audience believed teachers unions should be faulted for poor-performing schools, but by the close of the program, an astonishing 68 percent believed school employee unions contributed to the problem.

In Michigan, with the drama surrounding the federal Race to the Top competitive grant program, the role of teachers unions has been scrutinized. The Michigan Education Association refused to sign on to the reforms passed by the Legislature early this year, and many believe this was one of the reasons why the state wasn't selected to be one of the finalists for the first round of grant money.

The Intelligence Squared debate featured six panelists, three critical and three supportive of unions. The debate became heated at times, especially when the audience began asking questions. One pro-union participant, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, insinuated that the audience was packed by groups presupposed to be anti-union.

The chief arguments made by the pro-union panelists were that some heavily unionized states outperformed less unionized ones; that unions do not oppose reforms; and that unions simultaneously work to do what's best for kids by protecting the best interests of teachers.

Union critics argued that public employee unions commonly block effective reforms like greater parental choice; that they protect the jobs of the worst teachers by demanding seniority-based hiring practices and tenure; and that they use their political power to command public support and legal protection.

Two major sticking points centered on school choice, particularly charter schools, and teacher evaluations. Michigan recently selectively expanded its cap on the number of charter schools that can operate in the state. Union critics in the debate argued that unions have successfully pressured lawmakers to create charter school caps, because most charters are not unionized.

Weingarten asserted that unions "want to make sure every single child has a choice," and pointed out that she chairs the board of trustees for a New York City charter school run by an AFT affiliate. Weingarten did not mention that a progress report of this union-led charter school showed the school fell short by many different measures of student achievement.

The panelists critical of unions asserted repeatedly that unions protect bad teachers, and that it's nearly impossible for schools to remove an ineffective teacher. Terry Moe, a Stanford professor, pointed out that 99 percent of teachers receive satisfactory performance evaluations because it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to remove tenured teachers. In response to a question from the audience, both sides agreed that less than 20 teachers were fired out of the more than 50,000 teachers in NYC last year.

In the recent "Race to the Top" legislation, Michigan lawmakers wrote language into the school code that would allow schools to use a new evaluation system to identify ineffective teachers and remove them from the classroom. However, the new laws left the Teacher Tenure Act untouched, effectively keeping in place the laborious and expensive process that discourages many schools from even attempting to rid themselves of ineffective teachers.

During the NPR debate, Gary Smuts and Kate McLaughlin, both union proponents, claimed that both the school districts in which they work have effective evaluation systems, and argued that this goes to show that unions really can work in the best interest of students.

In response to this and the argument that unions are supportive of school choice and charter schools, Moe closed by saying:

"We've heard that several times that [unions] want choice, that they want accountability, and my response is: 'Hey, it's 2010. Where've you been?'...The reason we don't have them is that they've been opposing them."