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THE FINAL WORD

OPINIONS + EDITORIAL

Don't miss MEA opt-out month

By Ingrid Jacques

Time passes swiftly in the summer. And July will quickly turn into August, which for many teachers is the only month their union will allow them to leave. And don't expect the Michigan Education Association to remind its members.

Even though Michigan is now a right-to-work state, the union is holding to its one-month opt-out window. The [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#) believes that limited window is illegal under the law, and has challenged it with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission.

But for now, teachers so inclined should plan on leaving the union in August. The [Mackinac Center](#) has developed a website, [AugustOptOut.org](#), to help educate teachers about the window and guide them through the process if they wish to leave the union. "It can be extremely confusing," says Vincent Vernuccio, director of labor policy at the center.

Many teachers don't know about the limited time-frame, and last year some had believed they successfully left the union—until the MEA started coming after them for unpaid dues. For example, Bangor kindergarten teacher Kimberle Byrd thought she was out of the union but then got a rude awakening when she received a notice from a collections agency.

Coopersville teacher Miriam Chanski is one of two lucky teachers the union agreed to let go this spring, after almost a year of wrangling with the union. Last fall, she filed an unfair labor practice complaint against the MEA over its limited opt-out period. Yet most teachers aren't off the hook, and the union has started actively threatening the credit of teachers like Byrd who didn't pay their dues. Earlier this year, an MEA administrator said 8,000 members hadn't paid.

The MEA is the state's largest teachers union, with about 150,000 members. The American Federation of Teachers-Michigan, which represents about 35,000 members, doesn't have a limited opt-out window.

Last year, after right to work went into effect, an estimated 15,000 teachers were able to leave their union — and 10 percent did. This year, four times as many teachers will have the opportunity. Around 330 public school districts now have



(Courtesy of the Mackinac Center)

Coopersville teacher Miriam Chanski had to fight for almost a year to leave her teachers union, after she missed the August window to opt out.

contracts subject to the right-to-work law, representing 60 percent of teachers. Of course, at least 145 districts—including some of the largest in Michigan—passed contracts that extended years into the future before right to work took effect in March 2013. So it will be a long time before the full impact of the law is felt.

Union enthusiasts who aren't pleased that teachers can drop out yet still reap benefits of union-negotiated contracts should press the Legislature to address this issue. In Michigan, public sector union members who leave their unions cannot represent themselves.

Now that right to work makes union membership in Michigan optional, all unions are going to have to do a better job selling themselves to employees. Treating those who want to leave badly isn't going to win them points.

Teachers who don't believe the MEA does them any favors and who don't support its political work could probably find a better use for the \$1,000 in annual dues. And those who like the union can stay.

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