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Rob Wiersema: A teacher's story of leaving the MEA

By Rob Wiersema

When Michigan became a right-to-work state last year, I seized the opportunity to leave the Michigan Education Association. I approached this decision from a variety of perspectives. I have been a public school teacher for almost two decades. Before that, I taught at a private school and a community college. I also served on a local school board for eight years.

I no longer felt the MEA was providing value for the thousands of dollars in dues I paid over the years. Worse, I have seen how destructive it has been to quality education.

Ostensibly, the MEA is an association intended to improve student performance through professional development of teachers. Yet, I witnessed how my local unit fought for this activity to take place outside the school calendar, with the understanding that teachers would make the hours up on their own time. The MEA did little or nothing to provide worthwhile developmental activities or resources. Whatever we chose required approval from the principal and it ended up taking more time and effort to satisfy the paperwork than if the union kept this as part of the calendar.

The MEA also fights for work rules that stifle high performing teachers and innovation. In the private sector, workers find advancement through lateral promotion, often by leaving one company for another for better pay and benefits. This system gives workers incentive to perform at their best. Not so in a unionized public school. If a teacher wants to move to another district, they have to start near the beginning of the "step" scale. This causes teachers to stay with one employer until retirement. Teachers lose because they don't have the ability to move up the pay scale based on performance and schools lose because they're unable to bring fresh, experienced talent into the classroom.

The step scale system also distorts the true market value of teachers. Most of us, including myself, are paid above market value. I know this because if I were to be hit by a bus tomorrow, my principal would have hundreds of qualified resumes for that teaching position. Economics tells us the market wage would fall to the equilibrium, but when wages are kept artificially high we attract a glut of student teachers, many leaving college in debt, hoping for a public school job.

Because wages are high, districts must restrict the number of teachers hired. Students suffer because they are offered fewer choices and often face classrooms with potential overcrowding.

When I attempted to leave the MEA, it became clear that this was not an organization with its members' best interests in mind. I called, emailed and wrote letters asking how to exercise my rights, but my questions went unanswered. Only by reading information on the Mackinac Center's website



The East Lansing headquarters of the Michigan Education Association is shown in in this 2012 photo. The viewpoint writer recounts his story of leaving the MEA after Michigan passed right-to-work legislation. / Rod Sanford/Lansing State Journal.

did I learn of the so-called "August window," the only time the MEA allows members to leave. The MEA claims we all signed a contract stipulating this, but when I asked my local association president to provide a copy, she was flummoxed and claimed no knowledge of such a thing. What kind of professional organization would want to keep a member who has expressed a desire to leave?

The MEA may claim I'm now a "free rider," but I have no desire to use any of its services. Through the Association of American Educators, I have doubled my liability insurance for about one quarter of the price I was paying in dues. Unfortunately, I'm not completely free. Unions for decades have fought for laws that allow the MEA to still arbitrate any grievance in the workplace I might have and negotiate my pay, benefits and work rules. Millions of workers manage to get fair deals without unions and I feel I would be no different.

We are now in the age of new instructional delivery systems that will revolutionize education, yet the MEA resists. Sir Ken Robinson and other education experts advocate for a blend of classroom, lab and individual online experiences — services delivered to students where they want and when. To remain competitive, we must serve our students, their families and the community. Teachers can't do that when the MEA's main goal is preserving itself by offering unsustainable and false promises to members.

I would encourage my colleagues statewide to visit www.Augustoptout.org and make up their own minds whether or not they wish to remain in the MEA.

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