



Voluntary Unionism Puts Interests of Students and Teachers First

by Alicia M. Sikkenga

Summary

Education reform remains a popular issue with most Michigan parents, but serious reforms are blocked at every turn by powerful unions. Replacing the current system of compulsory unionism for public school employees with one of voluntary unionism would help ensure that popular and necessary reforms pass as well as protect the rights of teachers who disagree with the politics of unions they are forced to financially support.

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The underlying obstacle facing real and necessary education reform remains compulsory unionism in public education.

Michigan public schools are at a crossroads. By many measures, student academic achievement continues to flounder. Businesses, colleges, and universities are spending large sums of money on remedial education for students who never mastered the basic skills in the K-12 system. And polls reveal widespread dissatisfaction with public schools among parents.

Yet despite all these problems, efforts at serious reform are continuously being thwarted. Michigan's most recent attempt at change—a voucher initiative to allow students trapped in failing schools a chance to attend other schools—was defeated. Attempts to raise the legislative limit on charter schools—an alternative preferred by many Michigan parents—also have been rebuffed.

Why? It's not because the idea of greater school choice in the form of vouchers or charter schools lacks merit. No, the defeat of both of these reform measures is largely attributable to resistance from the teachers' unions, who every election cycle spend millions of dollars—collected through compulsory union dues—to advance their special-interest political agenda.

The underlying obstacle facing real and necessary education reform, then, remains compulsory unionism in public education. No meaningful reform measure can be implemented under the current mandatory collective bargaining structure, which requires teachers to join or financially support a labor organization—even if that organization promotes an agenda that conflicts with the best interests of students.

How did compulsory unionism come to dominate our schools in the first place? In the 1930s, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) to allow private-sector employees to organize into labor unions. Congress, in its wisdom, chose not to extend the NLRA's provisions to public employees, believing such action was not in the public interest.

In 1947, Michigan passed the Public Employment Relations Act (PERA), which allowed state workers, including public school employees, to organize and enter into collective bargaining agreements. As a result, most of Michigan's public school employees are now bound by contract

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agreements that obligate them to join or financially support a labor organization—and its political and ideological positions—as a condition of employment.

Compulsory unionism not only acts as a barrier to education reform, it also hinders educators and the educational mission. Individual teacher desires and needs are overridden by the interests of the group, as determined by union officials. The result is that many talented teachers resign, and many more would-be teachers never go into education.

Clearly, it's time to replace compulsory unionism with a voluntary bargaining model, wherein teachers would have the option to join with others to participate in collective bargaining, but they would not be *required* to join or financially support a labor organization. Public school employees could negotiate terms of employment individually to best meet their unique needs.

Voluntary unionism also would give employees freedom to support the social, political, or ideological causes that they favor, rather than being forced to support causes they find offensive. And unions would be relieved of any representational responsibility toward teachers who opt out of the collective bargaining regime.

Voluntary unionism is not a radical approach to education reform. Gov. Engler, in an October 1993 address to the Legislature, declared that no teacher in Michigan should be compelled to join and pay dues to a labor organization as a condition of employment.

Seventeen states do not have compulsory unionism for public school teachers. Of those 17 states, 10 neither prohibit nor mandate collective bargaining, while seven go beyond what is being advocated here and actually prohibit collective bargaining for public school teachers.

A recent RAND Corporation study noted that Texas and North Carolina, states without compulsory unionism, have shown the most improvement in educational test scores. Texas and fellow non-compulsory unionism states Missouri and Georgia have independent professional teacher associations that are larger than their union counterparts. And Georgia's teacher salaries have increased 24 percent over the last four years without collective bargaining.

Voluntary unionism doesn't take away employees' rights to organize, form unions, or enter into collective bargaining agreements. It merely allows individual school employees the opportunity to negotiate the best deal for themselves, if they wish.

It's time to say yes to education reform that better meets the needs of students and respects the rights of teachers. It's time to say yes to voluntary unionism for public school employees.

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(Alicia M. Sikkenga is labor policy research assistant at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Michigan. More information on labor reform is available at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and her affiliation are cited.)

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Michael D. LaFaive
Research Project Manager
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, MI 48640

Phone: (517) 631-0900
Fax: (517) 631-0964

www.mackinac.org
LaFaive@mackinac.org