



ACADEMY

Executive Committee

3/13/2011

Dear Member,

Across the country, public education is under attack. Not only are legislatures slashing budgets, promoting unaccountable systems like schools of innovation, and imposing egregious evaluation systems and other mandates, but some states are repressing the collective voice of public education employees, the public sector union. Don't mistake the conflict in Wisconsin as simply one over collective bargaining rights, as important as they are; far more is at stake.

Collective bargaining is how public education employees give input on the working conditions in their schools. In Colorado, we don't enjoy a collective bargaining law, but many local associations in Colorado have negotiated collective bargaining agreements with their district administrations. Those associations are able to hold administrations more accountable; better protect the interests of students, parents, teachers, and support professionals from bureaucratic administrations; and improve educational outcomes in their schools. Does collective bargaining always promote best practices? No, as with any organization, the association does not always make the best decisions, yet it serves as a critical counterweight to the power of central administrations and school principals.

An attack on collective bargaining in one state is an attack on collective bargaining in all states. Even though we don't currently engage in collective bargaining in Academy, we could do so. Under Doug Lundberg's leadership in the 1980's, the Academy Education Association was very close to obtaining a collective bargaining agreement with the district.

Now with Mr. Lundberg as the President of the School Board and considering the current growth of the association, we might yet obtain a collective bargaining agreement. However, the Colorado Legislature could easily change the law and make collective bargaining much more difficult or even impossible. Union-busting politicians in Colorado might be emboldened by the successes of Governor Walker and the anti-union politicians in Wisconsin to make changes to Colorado Law.

The Association also faces a larger threat. In many places, legislatures and administrations are trying to shut down payroll deduction of membership dues. If successful, such efforts could result in a substantial reduction in association revenues. Although organization at the local level is hugely important to the success of our organization, the state and national associations (CEA and NEA) play important roles in protecting public education. Public sector unions constitute one of the largest lobbying groups in the country. Labor campaign contributions are the fourth largest in federal elections, and education employees are the biggest contributors among labor groups, making about 41 percent of all public sector workers' contributions. Many groups would like to silence the collective voice of public education employees. Although the CEA and NEA sometimes make political compromises that don't reflect the core values of members, they serve as important guardians of our profession. Without their persistent efforts (and the dues that sustain them) in defense of public education, politicians backed by billionaires and partisan groups would impose their vision for the future, a future that doesn't emphasize the importance of community, education, and public service.

What can you do to help change the tide of union busting? You can donate to a fund called the 51 Fund, organized by the NEA. The 51 Fund will help feed volunteers, organize rallies, and get the message out to people everywhere that the right to collective bargaining ensures a strong middle-class. Although most public education employees are cash-strapped these days, a donation of \$15 can make a difference in



defending public education. Take a moment to look at <http://51fund.neafoundation.org/>. You can also sign the NEA National Petition for Workers' Rights (<http://www.educationvotes.nea.org/nationalpetition/>), and you can subscribe to the NEA Education Insider newsletter and become a cyber-lobbyist (<http://www.nea.org/lac>).

As important as are those national efforts, local efforts are even more important. If the efforts of public education employees only amount to “clicktivism,” then we are certainly doomed. Most of us are over-worked and have little time to devote to civic involvement. Yet we must summon the motivation and energy to do so. We are over-worked because the working conditions in public education are poor and must be changed. Resistance to corporate-driven attacks on public education must take the form of a dynamic, broadly based organization. Change at the state and national level can only happen if organization at the local level promotes such change.



Significant change must occur here in Academy. We must challenge the administration on its use of our tax dollars. According to the Budget Committee report I recently sent to the membership, Academy School District 20 spends far too much on administration and operations and maintenance. While over 100 instructional paraprofessionals have been cut from our schools since 2007-2008, the size of administrative and Office/Admin Support staffs has risen (adding seven positions last year alone). The much reported cuts in the EAC appear to have come mostly from Instructional Support Services, not administration. We must organize in our schools, discuss the issues that concern us, communicate with community partners, and promote positive change. These efforts must come from you and the people in your schools. The Association leadership can assist you in your efforts, but they can't make them happen for you.

I encourage you to communicate with one of the Association Representatives for your work site. Become an Association Representative. Hold a meeting of the association in your workplace; you need not receive any special dispensation to do so. Attend a meeting of the Association Representative Council (the next meeting is on March 29th at 4:00 pm at Panera at 7344 North Academy). Start a book club of three or four people at your site. You could read The Death and Life of the Great American School System, for example, or you could do a regular coffee date and catch up on issues (contact me for more information about starting a book club). All of these efforts, seemingly small and inconsequential, contribute to greater awareness in our schools and workplaces; these efforts are vital to an expanding awareness of working conditions in education and the possibilities for positive change.

For years we have heard that the economy will turn around any day, that we are cushioned from the worst economic problems because of the Mill Levy Override, and that we are lucky to have our jobs. These messages are unsatisfactory in the face of dramatic budget cuts. We are looking at \$10.3 million in cuts for the coming school year, following on years of cuts to our schools. Salaries have been frozen for years, classified wages are abysmally low, and the cost of medical benefits will substantially increase next year. The budget cuts for the following year are likely to be as large or larger. The administration's messages appear intended to mollify Academy employees, not to express clear foresight and vision for change in Academy. The Association must fill this vacuum in vision. Collectively we know best how to run our schools, where change should occur, and how best to adapt to the changing economic reality of our state and our country.

The struggle for positive change begins and ends in your school. Ultimately, legislatures and school boards are reflections of who we are as a people. When we organize in support of professionalism and the needs of our communities, we are working toward change at the district, state, and national levels.

Start the dialogue in your school.

Sincerely,

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President of the AEA

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