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 Education

Building a Better Teacher

Teachers unions often resist school reforms



Angela Peterson

Mary Lou Defino (left) of Milwaukee High School of the Arts and Mary Barrett, a school social worker for MPS, participate in a group exercise on speaking and listening while attending the annual WEAC Convention on Oct. 28 in Madison. The WEAC has about 98,000 members across the state.

WEAC head cites learning efforts, but changes come slowly

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

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The Obama administration could not have set the stage for a better demonstration of the power and priorities of Wisconsin's teachers unions.

With its Race to the Top competition, the federal government dangled the prospect of a share of \$4.35 billion for those states ready to enact reforms, especially related to improving teacher and principal performance.

Eyes on that prize, states launched plans tying teacher pay and promotions to student achievement, giving state officials more control over local schools and overhauling data tracking and assessment systems.

Then the game got tricky: Teachers unions had to be on board.

In the end, only 11 states and the District of Columbia ended up with money from the program this year. Wisconsin got nothing.

The Wisconsin Education Association Council had helped kill or watered down critical parts of the state's proposal, with the president of the teachers union attaching a letter to the application that one participant described as "grudging." In the end, only 12% of the union's local leaders endorsed a plan that might have brought in more than \$250 million in school funding to Wisconsin.

Perhaps the state is better off, as some educators contend in criticizing the priorities and the strings attached to the federal dollars.

But the episode shows that when it comes to assessing and improving teacher quality, the most powerful voice in Wisconsin - and perhaps the biggest obstacle - could be the teachers union.

"The teachers union, they can be very effective in these reforms if they're willing to sit at the table and be fair about it," said state Rep. Brett Davis (R-Oregon), former chair of the Assembly's education committee. "But, up to now, they've controlled all the cards and there's no reason for them not to do anything they want."

On top of being one of the state's most dominant political forces, with an ability to influence legislation and elections, Wisconsin's teachers unions have a direct effect on teacher quality through the role they play in local contract negotiations and representation of teachers targeted for improvement or dismissal.

By adhering to pay schedules that fail to distinguish between low- and high-performing teachers, protecting ineffective teachers from dismissal and fighting for work rules that provide more benefits for their members than for children, teachers unions stand in the way of improving the profession, critics argue.

For example, then-Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent William Andreopoulos complained only last year that the district's teachers union leaders had not allowed their members to vote on a proposal that would have used federal stimulus dollars to extend the school day and provide extra professional development for teachers. [Research suggests](#) that, if done well, adding instructional time can benefit low-income and other students who have fewer learning opportunities outside school.

Some reform progress

Across the country, teachers unions have taken leadership roles on such reform projects as tying teacher bonuses to student test score results and revamping teacher evaluations.

On Thursday, the National Education Association announced it would form a 21-member commission to study the teaching profession and make recommendations on the union's role in promoting teacher effectiveness and advancing the profession. WEAC is an affiliate to that national union.

"I think reform is most likely to be embraced when teachers have trust in their union leaders and when union leaders have faith in district officials," said Richard Kahlenberg, an education policy expert at the liberal Century Foundation.

Wisconsin's unions largely have not been open to change, however.

Dal Lawrence, the former longtime president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers and current member of the Teachers Union Reform Network, called the state's teachers union one of the most "retrograde" in the country, along with New York's.

"In Wisconsin, they think they invented labor-management relations in the 1920s and they don't want to hear about anything new since then," he said.

WEAC President Mary Bell challenged the notion that her organization hasn't been willing to innovate, pointing to efforts in districts such as Green Bay, where the union has worked with the superintendent on reforming professional development, and to a statewide licensure overhaul that more closely targets teachers' professional development to their needs.

WEAC - which represents teachers in all but 18 of the state's 425 school districts and counts about 98,000 members - also has advocated for higher pay for teachers in hard-to-staff schools or subject areas and providing bonuses for teachers who earn certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, she said. Such efforts would have been considered anathema in the past to teachers unions, originally formed in the image of factory-floor labor organizations to protect a largely female membership against arbitrary pay and dismissal practices.

Political shift

But there's no mistaking that the recent change in tone by the unions' usual allies in the Democratic Party, led by President Barack Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, is jarring the union.

According to figures from the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, WEAC's political action committee has spent more than \$9 million in unlimited independent expenditures on behalf of political candidates between 1998 and 2008, with only \$17,136 of that amount spent to help a single Republican candidate - one who was challenging a GOP Assembly incumbent.

In the November elections, the WEAC political action committee spent nearly \$1.5 million to help Democrats in just four state Senate races, only to see three of them lose.

Pressure from Republicans, as well as from the state Department of Public Instruction, could force the union to re-examine its past positions on education issues, state Rep. Christine Sinicki (D-Milwaukee) said. She saw similar movement as a Milwaukee School Board member in the 1990s.

"You actually saw the teachers union working on proposals to give schools more autonomy, more say in

how they're running their schools, they saw changes needed," she said. "I think the same is going to happen now with the pressure from the federal government."

Within the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association are members pushing to take more responsibility for improving learning and others who view such a change reluctantly, union President Mike Langyel said.

He pointed to longtime programs that provide mentors for new teachers as well as those who have been identified as struggling in their classrooms as two examples of initiatives that arose from his union and have contributed to improving teacher quality in the district.

"Our job is to make sure it is real reform that works for kids," Langyel said.

The state's teachers unions will likely have to do more to convince skeptics that they are not obstructionists.

For a start, unions need to get away from their "completely contractual approach," with work regulated to the minute and restrictions on both the timing and frequency of supervisors' classroom visits, said Andrew Rotherham, author of the Eduwonk blog and the weekly "School of Thought" column in Time magazine.

A change in culture is needed, he said, with the entire educational system reorganized around performance - and with people in positions of responsibility given discretion and then held accountable for results.

"We've created a culture where teachers are infantilized in how they're treated," Rotherham said.

Contractual changes that delay tenure and allow for a more robust evaluation system to determine who qualifies for such job protection would help improve the quality of the profession, Andrekopoulos said. MPS' current teacher contract grants tenure following three years of service, after which it becomes substantially more difficult for the district to terminate a teacher with an unsatisfactory job performance.

Dogged legal protection

Andrekopoulos and others also say the union should not fight as hard against efforts to remove bad teachers from their classrooms. Such dogged legal representation can make districts reluctant to fight for teachers' removal in all but the most extraordinary circumstances.

Jeff Spitzer-Resnick, managing attorney at Disability Rights Wisconsin, pointed to a case in the Marinette School District where a teacher was terminated by the School Board related to allegations that included sitting on three children, pulling a student's hair, making demeaning comments about a student, and denying snacks and lunches to children in her class as disciplinary measures.

After a hearing that spanned seven evenings in which she was represented by a union attorney, the teacher was reinstated to her job by an arbitrator. The district eventually settled a federal lawsuit with the teacher that kept her from returning.

Protecting a teacher's due process rights "is different from a teachers union promoting and defending a clearly abusive teacher to stay in the classroom," Spitzer-Resnick said.

Bell defended WEAC's representation of teachers targeted for termination. No one wants an ineffective teacher in the classroom, she said, but the procedures used to remove teachers need to be fair.

Likewise, she said, instruments used to evaluate teacher performance should be sophisticated enough to account for all of the variables that can affect a child's success in the classroom before they can be used to punish or reward teachers.

Teacher quality is an important piece in school performance, Bell said, but it also can be elusive.

"Measuring it is not that simple," she said. "You have to use multiple measures. You have to take some time to really work with the people involved."

But Sarah Archibald, an education consultant who worked for seven months in Gov. Jim Doyle's office, offers a pragmatic reason for unions to consider in their continued fight to improve teacher wages and working conditions:

"Keeping low-performing teachers in classrooms hurts everyone, most of all kids, and disproportionately, low-income kids and kids of color," Archibald said. "But it also hurts the teaching profession."

"It is very difficult to argue for paying teachers more - even though it makes sense based on evidence from countries with higher performing educational systems - when some of that money would go to teachers who are not performing in the classroom but who cannot be dismissed on that basis or even paid less than their higher performing peers."

Dana Goldstein, Justin Snider and Richard Lee Colvin of [The Hechinger Report](#) contributed to this report.

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