How Teachers' Unions Handcuff Schools

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When Tracey Bailey received the National Teacher of the Year Award from President Clinton in a festive Rose Garden ceremony in 1993, American Federation of Teachers chief Albert Shanker called to say how pleased he was that a union member had won this prestigious honor. But Bailey, a high school science teacher from Florida, is an AFT member no more. Today he believes that the big teachers' unions are a key reason for the failure of American public education, part of the problem rather than the solution. The unions, he thinks, are just "special interests protecting the status quo," pillars of "a system that too often rewards mediocrity and incompetence." Such a system, he says, "can't succeed."

Bailey is right. In the final analysis, no school reform can accomplish much if it does not focus on the quality of the basic unit of education—that human interaction between an adult and a group of children that we call teaching. The big teachers' unions, through the straitjacket of work rules that their contracts impose, inexorably subvert that fundamental encounter. These contracts structure the individual teacher's job in ways that offer him or her no incentives for excellence in the classroom—indeed, that perversely reward failure.

So as Tracey Bailey and many other dedicated teachers have learned, schools can't improve until reformers confront the deadly consequences of the power that teachers' unions wield over a monopolistic industry, not only through contracts but also through the unions' influence on the elected officials who regulate the education industry. Until then, any reform—whether more money for the schools or smaller classes or high national standards or charter schools—will get short-circuited from the very outset.

Trade unionism is a recent development in public education. During the first 100 years of taxpayer-funded public schools, teachers had no collective bargaining rights, though many enjoyed civil-service protec-

tion. While the public schools made steady progress during those years, it's indisputable that teachers were underpaid and often were moved around like interchangeable parts in a one-size-fits-all system. Many teachers, along with principals and other administrators, belonged to a staid professional organization called the National Education Association, to which the words "unionism" and "strike" were anathema. Inevitably, teachers working in a factory-style system figured they might as well organize themselves into factory-style unions. The big breakthrough came in New York City in 1961, when the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), led by a charismatic high school math teacher named Albert Shanker—whose recent death deprived the teachers' unions of one of the towering figures in the American labor movement—went on strike and won the right to bargain for all city teachers. Though Shanker insisted that the struggle was about more than mere bread-and-butter issues—that it was also about improving the quality of public education and strengthening democracy—the contract the UFT signed with the New York City Board of Education nevertheless reflected the traditional industrial model. It set up uniform pay scales and seniority rights for teachers, limited their classroom hours, and required new teachers to be automatically enrolled in the union and have their dues deducted from their paychecks.

Following this example, the once conservative NEA also veered toward militant trade unionism. By the mid-seventies it had a majority of the nation's teachers covered by collective bargaining agreements. Now the NEA and the AFT, the national parent body of New York's UFT, together represent more than 3 million school employees, including 80 percent of the nation's 3 million public school teachers. The two unions and their state and local affiliates take in $1.3 billion each year from dues and employ 6,000 full-time staff members.

Today the two national unions cast a giant shadow over not just American public education but also Democratic Party politics. As a California judge recently found, that state's NEA affiliate spent only half of its dues income on activities related to collective bargaining and used the other half for electoral politics, lobbying, and general advocacy for social, educational, and political causes. Nationally, in the 1996 election, the teachers' unions contributed more than $9 million directly to Bill Clinton and other Democratic candidates through political action committees. But the PACs were just the visible tip of a vast iceberg of soft money, independent media buys, thousands of

full-time campaign workers paid with union dues, and in-kind services such as phone banks and direct mail advertising. Myron Lieberman, author of a forthcoming book on teachers' unions, estimates that the NEA and AFT together spent at least $50 million for the campaign compared to the $35 million that the AFL-CIO spent. And at last summer's Democratic convention, the teachers' union caucus constituted 11 percent of all delegates—a bigger share than the delegation from California.

These political investments have paid off. In the Clinton Department of Education, former NEA issues director Sharon Robinson is assistant secretary for research and educational improvement, shaping the national education debate with her office's research reports and assessments of student performance. And when the Republican Congress was on the verge of passing legislation last year to rescue a few thousand poor students from Washington, D.C.'s hopelessly broken public school system by offering them private school scholarships, the NEA, fearful that these vouchers might encourage similar legislation in the states, furiously lobbied the White House. President Clinton, who had first indicated that he would sign the bill, backtracked and said he would veto it.

The teachers' unions spend millions each year on advertising to convince the American people that when they flex their political muscle in cases like this, more often on the state than on the national level, they are working for the benefit of the nation's schoolchildren. Their pitch goes something like this: In driving up wages and improving working conditions, the unions have made the teaching profession far more attractive to qualified young people. PAC activities and political lobbying help pressure elected officials to finance education adequately, so that school boards can pay teachers the salaries they deserve, hire more teachers and reduce class size, provide staff development, and purchase books. Result: better schools and improved student performance.

There's some truth in these claims. The rise in the sixties and seventies of powerful teachers' unions with exclusive bargaining rights did lead to a huge jump in public school funding: Between 1965 and 1990, average spending per pupil nationwide increased from $2,402 to $5,582 in inflation-adjusted dollars. The average pupil-teacher ratio dropped from 24.1 to 17.3. The percentage of teachers with master's degrees increased from 23.2 to 52.6. The median years of experience for teachers went from 8 to 15. Between 1979 and 1989 average teacher salaries

rose 20 percent in real dollars. Salaries for new public school teachers during that period rose 13 percent, compared to a mere 3.5 percent increase for all other college graduates taking entry-level positions.

Unfortunately for America's children, the rest of the unions' argument doesn't stand up. The extra money didn't improve student performance. To the contrary, during that same period average SAT scores for public school students declined by 10 percent, dropout rates in urban school systems increased, and American students scored at or near the bottom in comparisons with other industrialized nations. After years of examining the data, the nation's leading education economist, Eric Hanushek of the University of Rochester, concluded: "There appears to be no strong or systematic relationship between school expenditures and student performance."

So why did the bottom drop out of American public education just as per-pupil spending soared? Basic economics provides a compelling answer, though countless blue-ribbon commissions, and indeed much of the present national dialogue about school reform, have failed to acknowledge it: The $250 billion public education industry behaves precisely like any other publicly protected monopoly. Union negotiators in the private sector know that if they insist on protecting incompetent workers and cling to outdated work rules, especially in the global economy of the nineties, the company will begin losing market share, and union members will lose their jobs. In public education, by contrast, collective bargaining takes place without the constraining discipline of the market. When school board representatives sit down with union officials to negotiate a labor contract, neither party is under pressure to pay attention to worker productivity or the system's overall competitiveness: If the contract allows some teachers to be paid for hardly working at all, and others to perform incompetently without penalty, there is no real economic danger for either side. After all, most of the monopoly's customers, the schoolchildren, have nowhere else to go. Historically, tax revenues have continued to flow into the schools no matter how poorly they perform. Newark's public schools, for instance, have performed worse and worse in recent years, but per-pupil annual expenditure there is now almost $10,000, 50 percent above the U.S. average.

"Let's roll up our sleeves . . . and work together to give our children the schools they deserve," read the full-page *New York Times* ad taken out by New York City's United Federation of Teachers early this year. "We've tried everything else; now let's try what works," said a second

UFT ad a few days later. These were the opening salvos of a major media blitz laying out the UFT's program for "turning our schools around." The nearly $1 million print, radio, and TV ad campaign was needed, UFT president Sandra Feldman told her members, because "often the union is erroneously looked at as an impediment to school reform, and it's time to set the record straight."

The UFT has good reason to be concerned. In a colossal understatement, one of the ads acknowledged that "recent school report cards show that students in our city are losing ground." Actually, what the State Education Department's recently released school performance reports show is a near meltdown of what was once the nation's premier urban school system.

Third-grade reading scores are among the most useful benchmarks for judging any school system's performance. Children who can't read in third grade are likely to fall even further behind in the later grades. And schools that can't manage to get children reading after nearly four years in the classroom are not likely to do very well in other areas. So it is stunning to discover that only 30.2 percent of New York City's third-graders are reading at grade level, compared to 62.2 percent in the rest of the state, and that the reading scores are dismal not only in schools with high numbers of poor, minority children but in many middle-class schools, in districts that have "choice" programs and districts that have resisted reform, in schools that favor "progressive" teaching styles and more traditional schools. For example, at predominantly middle-class P.S. 87, one of the city's "hot" schools and a bastion of progressive "child-centered" teaching methods, close to half the school's third-graders read below grade level. At the Mohegan school in District 12 in the Bronx, which has a very poor, all-minority student population and follows the more traditional "core knowledge" philosophy of scholar E.D. Hirsch, Jr., only 19 percent of the third-graders read at grade level.

In the 35 years since Albert Shanker and his followers took to the streets, the UFT has become the richest and most powerful teachers' union local in the country. It represents 95,000 school employees, including 60,000 classroom teachers, from whom it collects $60 million in annual dues. School chancellors come and go, but the UFT endures—a perennial power at the Board of Education and in the State Legislature, which regulates the city's schools. It has played a pivotal role in electing (and defeating) mayors and governors and has often exercised virtual veto power over the selection of school chancellors. In 1993 the UFT

punished Mayor David Dinkins for not giving in to its contract demands by running a $1 million ad campaign against him at the beginning of the mayoral campaign and withholding the phone banks that were an essential part of Dinkins's successful campaign in 1989.

The UFT, together with New York State United Teachers, the state AFT affiliate, is easily the most powerful special-interest lobby in Albany. In the first six months of 1996 alone, the New York teachers' unions' PAC reported $900,000 in lobbying expenses and political contributions to legislators—three times as much as the next highest group, the state medical societies. The teachers' unions make their contributions to those legislators who are most likely to help them, regardless of party—to the majority Democrats in the Assembly and the majority Republicans in the Senate.

In return, the teachers' unions get to set the limits of permissible education debate in the Legislature. Debra Mazzarelli, the mother of two public school children and a parent activist, learned that lesson after she was elected to the State Assembly from Patchogue, Long Island, two years ago on a platform calling for ending automatic tenure protection for public school teachers. "I was just fed up that we were paying teachers $80,000 a year but couldn't hold them accountable and certainly couldn't fire them if they were incompetent," she said. Her bill to end teacher tenure won support from the New York State School Boards Association, which held hearings around the state. But in typical Albany fashion, the Assembly education committee, led by Steven Sanders, a leading recipient of teachers' union PAC money, won't even schedule a discussion in committee on the proposed legislation. Meanwhile, New York continues to have one of the most restrictive state laws for initiating disciplinary proceedings against incompetent teachers. Largely the work of the teachers' unions, it passed without public hearings and almost guarantees that no tenured teachers are ever fired.

After a recent public conference on the prospects of getting charter school legislation passed in Albany (26 states now have such laws, but not New York), Beth Lief, executive director of a reform organization called New Visions for Public Schools and one of the conference conveners, told a *New York Times* reporter that one group would ultimately decide the fate of the proposal. "There is no piece of education legislation in this state that passes without the UFT," the *Times* quoted her as saying. UFT president Sandra Feldman, standing next to Lief, didn't blink when she heard this assessment of her union's power. Indeed, the UFT leadership

seems to enjoy reminding its members of its political clout. The union newspaper recently excerpted without comment an item from *Crain's New York Business* describing Feldman as someone who "wields more control over the education of New York City children than any mayor."

Several former Board of Education officials have told me that the chancellors they worked for would never make a high-level management appointment over the objection of the UFT. Chancellors accommodate the union for two very important reasons: They know that the UFT could have blocked their own appointments, and they realize that they need the union's lobbying power to help wring needed measures and funds from the State Legislature and City Council. As a result of this political alliance of necessity, the UFT has become part of the permanent government at 110 Livingston Street. The same former Board officials told me that UFT vice president David Sherman has had the run of Board headquarters for years and frequently participates in high-level policy meetings.

New teachers quickly learn how central the union is to the system's governance. A senior union official always directs the orientation at 110 Livingston Street for their first assignments. And when new teachers get their first paychecks, they discover that $630 of their yearly wages of $29,000 will be deducted for union dues.

The current contract between the Board of Education and the UFT can best be described as a "we-don't-do-windows" document. Among the tasks that principals are forbidden to require of teachers under the contract: attending more than one staff meeting per month after school hours, walking the children to a school bus, patrolling the hallways or the lunchroom or the schoolyard, covering an extra class in an emergency, attending a lunchtime staff meeting, or coming in a few days prior to the opening of school each September to do some planning.

The contract undermines teacher professionalism, excellence, and hard work in other ways. In all but a handful of the city's schools, principals must fill many of their teacher vacancies according to seniority rather than merit. J. Cozzi Perullo, principal of the elite Stuyvesant High School, has complained that she has no control over who is hired for half of the school's posted vacancies. And when a teacher does transfer from one city school to another, the principal of the new school can't even get the previous principal's written comments on the transferring teacher's personnel file.

The contract makes it almost insurmountably difficult for a principal even to begin the process of charging a teacher with incompetence

under the union-written state education law. Every time the principal wants to record a negative evaluation in the teacher's personnel file, the teacher can contest that single entry through three separate grievance procedures, leading all the way up to the Board of Education. Even after the Board has upheld the principal, the teacher, with the help of the union, can go to arbitration to contest the single negative entry. The process is so tortuous that most principals don't even bother trying; they accept it as a fact of school life that a certain number of incompetent teachers must be carried on the payroll.

Jorge Izquierdo of P.S. 163 in Manhattan is one of the rare principals who have not only tried to purge incompetent teachers but are willing to speak publicly about the issue. He told me that in the case of one totally dysfunctional teacher, he has spent close to 100 hours out of the building over the past two years in grievance sessions at the district office, at the Board of Education, and at arbitration sessions. Although every one of his negative evaluations has eventually been upheld, he still must go through the process for another year before this one employee might have to face formal disciplinary charges—a process that could take several more years. "I am like the CEO of a little corporation," says Izquierdo. "I am judged by whether or not I achieve the equivalent of a profit—how much the children gain in learning. But unlike any other CEO, I can't hire the people who work here or fire them when they're incompetent."

What is most revealing about the UFT contract, however, is what it does not say. In its 200 pages of text, this labor agreement breathes not a word about how many hours teachers must work. Article six stipulates only that "the school day . . . shall be 6 hours and 20 minutes" and that the school year lasts from the Tuesday after Labor Day until June 26. School principals may not require teachers to be in the building one day before that Tuesday, one minute before the students arrive each day, or one minute after the students leave.

The number of hours teachers work is not a trivial issue. Teaching is a labor-intensive occupation. At the elementary and secondary school level, teachers get results not necessarily because they are brilliant or attended elite education schools but because of the hours they spend with students in and after school, the hours they devote to reviewing students' work, and the hours they spend speaking with parents.

So how many hours do union teachers really work? According to a survey by the U.S. Department of Education, public school teachers

put in an average of 45 hours per week, including time in the classroom, work with students outside the classroom, preparation time in the school building, and work done at home. But since the survey is based wholly on teacher self-reporting, any bias is likely to be in favor of reporting too many hours worked rather than too few.

Doubtless, many public school teachers in New York do work 45 hours a week or more-at least during the 36 weeks that school is in session. One of the dirty little secrets of the system, however, is that there are many others who work close to, or exactly at, the contractual minimum. In the three different schools my children have attended, they have had several teachers who took the words in the contract about the length of the school day as gospel. Arriving in school just a few minutes before the children every morning, these teachers were usually out the door exactly at dismissal time. They rarely took any work home, grading at school the homework that they sporadically assigned. Assuming the teachers worked during all ten of the preparation periods provided for in the contract, and if we deduct their 50-minute "duty-free" lunch periods, I estimate that they worked a maximum of 28 hours per week, or about 1,000 hours per year. Some had enough seniority and graduate-school credits to put them at the top of the salary scale (presently $60,000, soon to be $70,000), so that they were earning a wage, not including benefits, of somewhere between $60 and $70 per hour. That's higher than the rate earned by employees with the city's top civil-service titles.

I don't know if 5 percent or 50 percent of the city's teachers work to the contractual minimum. And—scandalously—the Board of Education and city hall are also in the dark about the productivity of the system's teachers. In the past, the Board's labor negotiators tried to raise the issue of monitoring the number of hours teachers work. "The union never wanted to discuss it," one former Board official recalls. "They said their teachers were professionals, and it would be an insult."

It's unthinkable that managers of the city's police, fire, sanitation, or transportation agencies could do their job of trying to improve services without data on worker productivity. In public education, however, the city has agreed to ignore such basic management information. Worse, it doesn't matter, since all teachers get the same base salary, no matter how many hours they work or how effective they are in the classroom. Teachers get raises merely for showing up for another school year or for accumulating more education course credits, not for working hard and doing well.

This pervasive culture of mediocrity and time-serving takes a devastating toll on more ambitious teachers. Five years ago, journalist Samuel Freedman published *Small Victories,* a book about an extraordinary New York City teacher named Jessica Siegel. Following Siegel around for an entire year at Seward Park High School on the Lower East Side, Freedman was able to demonstrate just how much one teacher can accomplish with disadvantaged minority students through sheer hard work and determination. Freedman's reporting suggests that Siegel probably worked more than 60 hours per week, despite being at the low end of the salary scale. The book also makes clear that the system's bureaucracy and the UFT not only did not encourage Siegel but were obstacles she had to struggle to overcome. The union chapter chairperson at the school had a cushy assignment that put her in a classroom for no more than 90 minutes a day—after which she did everything she could to stifle Siegel's creative proposals to improve the school's performance. "The UFT did not exactly run the city school system," Freedman wrote, "but the system could not function without the union's assent."

By the time Freedman's book came out, Jessica Siegel had bailed out of teaching, having lasted ten years. The UFT, of course, is still present in every school, making sure that the city is never allowed to distinguish between teachers like her and my children's work-to-the-contract teachers. Instead of allowing a system of incentives that would encourage more Jessica Siegels to enter the classroom and stay in teaching, the union has been investing its energies in building its political power to ensure that won't happen.

Last July over 10,000 public school employees from every state in the union descended on Washington for the NEA's 75th annual representative assembly. I spent hours in the cafeterias and lounges speaking with delegates from places like Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Birmingham, Alabama; Billings, Montana; Honolulu, Hawaii; Denver, Colorado; and Storrs, Connecticut. Many were longtime union activists who had been coming to the conventions for years, with their very wealthy union paying their expenses.

All believed passionately that public education was under siege by the political right and profit-hungry corporations. One morning over coffee, a delegate from Connecticut told me that his school board was considering contracting with a private vendor to provide food services for the district's schools. His NEA local was mobilizing to fight this proposal, the

delegate approvingly reported, because it was a step on the road toward privatizing all the school district's education services.

The NEA wants public education preserved as an enterprise-free zone. Jersey City is a case in point. Last year, Mayor Brett Schundler came up with a plan to give some poor students trapped in failing public schools tax-funded scholarships. When the state blocked Schundler's initiative, a local Pepsico distributor offered to pay for some of the scholarships. The New Jersey NEA affiliate immediately organized a boycott of Pepsi products, and the company quickly backed down. Speakers at the NEA convention threatened similar dire consequences, including more boycotts, for any company that dared to poach on the union's preserve.

It was hardly surprising that the delegates would be preoccupied with the specter of privatization and vouchers. But what was astonishing is that this once conservative organization now favors a political and cultural agenda not only to the left of the national political mainstream but also far to the left of the Democratic Party. It was as if the veterans of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement had taken off their tie-dyed T-shirts, cut their hair, put on 30 pounds, and taken over the Rotary Club.

Besides electing new officers and listening to a lot of speeches, the delegates spent their days at the convention passing resolutions on almost every issue under the sun—from federal housing and immigration policy to nuclear testing and the World Court to support for the special rights of every aggrieved racial, ethnic, gender, sexual-preference, and "otherwise-abled" group, subgroup, and tribe in America. The NEA believes that America faces no Social Security crisis and wants to lower the retirement age and repeal all taxes on Social Security payments. It also doesn't believe Medicare is in trouble and opposes any premium increases. It favors a national single-payer health plan supported entirely by tax revenues, full funding for Head Start programs, and a huge increase in federal spending on education—especially for "disadvantaged students," immigrant and American Indian students, and students with disabilities.

It would be an understatement to say that the NEA favors an expansion of the welfare state. Its economic program more closely resembles the most radical of the European socialist parties. John Berthoud, a senior fellow of the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, has calculated that if Congress passed all the NEA's legislative proposals, the annual additional charge to the federal treasury would be $800 billion, requiring an average tax increase of $10,000 for a family of four.

The debate on education policy during last year's presidential election made much of the potential fragmenting effects on our civic culture of proposals like school choice or vouchers. Opponents of these experiments argued they would undermine the public schools, society's only means for inculcating children in our common civic heritage. They conjured up all sorts of imaginary horribles, including the specter that families would use vouchers to enroll their children in "David Duke schools," black nationalist schools, even schools that taught witchcraft. As *New Republic* editor Michael Kelly has summed up the case: "Public money is shared money, and it is to be used for the furtherance of shared values, in the interests of e pluribus unum. Charter schools and their like . . . take from the pluribus to destroy the unum."

Welcome to the NEA convention, Mr. Kelly. No charter schools or vouchers allowed, but not much unum either. This assembly of 10,000 public school employees celebrated not our common heritage but rather the disuniting of America. A standing convention resolution requires a set-aside of 20 percent of the convention seats for certain designated minorities. The NEA also officially recognizes numerous caucuses of the fragmented and oppressed and encourages delegates to join one or another, from the African American caucus, Hispanic caucus, American Indian and Alaska Native caucus, or Asian and Pacific Islander caucus, to the women's caucus or the gay and lesbian caucus. Each of these splinter groups proposes resolutions (almost never opposed by any other group) demanding special consideration in education and other domains for their particular ethnic, racial, or gender group. The resolutions add up to a massive assault on precisely those common ideals that the unions always insist are transmitted exclusively by the public schools.

For example, the NEA supports the "movement toward self-determination by American Indians/Alaska Natives" and believes these designated victim groups should control their own education. It supports "the infusion of Black studies and/or Afrocentric curricula into the curriculum." It strongly supports bilingual education for Hispanic students and opposes efforts to legislate English as the nation's official language. It believes that all schools should designate separate months to celebrate Black History, Hispanic Heritage, Native American Indian/Alaska Native Heritage, Asian/Pacific Heritage, Women's History, Lesbian and Gay History—which pretty well takes up the entire school calendar, leaving scant time for plain old American history.

It would be wrong to dismiss NEA convention debates as the adult equivalent of a high school model congress. The NEA's permanent bureaucracy takes the resolutions very seriously. Through its 1,300 field representatives assigned to state and local affiliates and through its permanent Capitol Hill lobbying staff, it works hard to get the convention agenda implemented by Congress and state legislatures and infused into the culture of the schools. The results include everything from distributing a classroom guidebook on sexual harassment by militant feminist Nan Stein of the Wellesley College Woman's Center, to "urg[ing] the appropriate government agencies to provide all materials and instruments necessary for left-handed students to achieve on an equal basis with their right-handed counterparts."

No matter that the voters don't support NEA's diversity and affirmative action agenda: This is America, where you can go straight to the courts. The NEA budgets $23 million a year for its legal arm, headed by a brilliant Washington lawyer named Robert Chanin. Chanin's primary mission, naturally, is to throw up legal challenges to every piece of legislation passed by democratically elected bodies that might free some children from the monopolistic public education system. But in addition, he intervenes in major court battles involving the pet issues of the Left. At the convention, Chanin spoke to the delegates about the NEA's amicus briefs on behalf of gay rights in Colorado, sexual integration of the all-male Citadel, and racial preferences in admissions at the University of Texas Law School. The NEA position had prevailed only in the first two cases, he reported, but racial quotas in the Lone Star State might fare better on appeal.

After the presidential election and the 1997 State of the Union address, with all its emoting about education, the two national teachers' unions may seem more powerful than ever. And with the NEA and the AFT seriously pursuing merger negotiations, a single national union might soon represent 3 million public school employees. It would be the biggest union not just in America but in the world.

Nevertheless, the teachers' unions may not be quite as unassailable as they appear. Despite the millions of dollars they spend on public relations every year, they have been unable to convince the American people that their children's schools and classrooms are in good hands. In a recent book, *Is There a Public for Public Schools?,* former Ford administration secretary of HEW David Mathews underlines the unions' dilemma when he writes that "Americans today seem to be halfway out the schoolhouse door."

Not only are the NEA and AFT clearly out of touch politically with the majority of the American people, but they have also positioned themselves far to the left of their own members. A 1995 NEA convention resolution calling for programs to train teachers to give "accurate portrayals of the roles and contributions of gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual people throughout history," for example, produced a ferocious backlash within the NEA's own membership, particularly in the South. When union teachers began turning in their membership cards and NEA locals faced losing their designation as exclusive bargaining agent, union leaders had to retreat.

The last reliable measures of the voting behavior and political allegiances of the nation's teachers were the CBS/*New York Times* exit polls during the 1980 and 1984 presidential elections. They showed that teachers, far from being way out on the left with their union leaders, were right in the American mainstream. In 1980, 46 percent of them voted for Ronald Reagan, 41 percent for Jimmy Carter, and 10 percent for John Anderson. By comparison, non-teachers went 51 percent for Reagan, 40 percent for Carter, and 6 percent for Anderson. Some 45 percent of teachers identified themselves as Democrats, 28 percent as Republicans, and 26 percent as independents—almost exactly mirroring the rest of the voting population. The 1984 exit polling produced very similar numbers.

The difference in political outlook between the teachers themselves and their union leaders has given rise to some upstart organizations that, though still small, represent a serious enough challenge to the big unions' monopoly to make them uneasy. National Teacher of the Year Award winner Tracey Bailey is now on the board of one such alternative group, the Association of American Educators. When he speaks to teachers, he tells them that they don't actually have to pay dues to a union that seems more interested in gay rights than in getting children to read, that instead they can be members of professional teacher organizations that focus on educating children and still provide such necessities as insurance.

In "right-to-work" states such as Georgia and Texas, where teachers are not coerced into joining unions, independent teachers' groups now have more members than either the NEA or AFT. Even in "union shop" states, many teachers chafe at the unions' political monopoly. In California last year, the Individual Rights Foundation used federal labor law to represent 700 teachers who resigned from the union and were able

to get 50 percent of their dues refunded (approximately $300 per teacher) because it was spent on political and social advocacy rather than collective bargaining. And now many of those same teachers have formed their own independent professional organization, the Professional Educators Group of California. The foundation expects the number of teachers defecting from the NEA to climb into the thousands next year.

Altogether the various independent teachers' organizations around the country now have close to 200,000 members. This ferment may lead the way to thoroughgoing teachers' union reform. What this budding movement needs in order to flower is a massive public information campaign. Teachers presently forced to pay dues to the NEA or AFT need to know what the unions are saying in their name and what rights they have to opt out. Parents and taxpayers need to learn more about teachers' union contracts and political lobbying, teacher productivity and credentialing, and even the $100,000-plus salaries of legions of teachers' union employees. It seems safe to say that if the American people merely knew about the resolutions passed at NEA conventions, the exodus "out the schoolhouse door" would accelerate.

The simple act of getting accurate information to the public about teachers' unions can greatly help the cause of school reform. Last year a good-government group called the Philadelphia Campaign for Public Education decided to butt into a nasty battle between the reform-minded superintendent of schools, David Hornbeck, and the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers over the next labor contract. Hornbeck had demanded that, in exchange for a wage increase, teachers should have to report to the schools a half hour earlier than the students and stay in the buildings a little after dismissal time. He also proposed that teachers who receive an unsatisfactory rating from their principals be denied automatic longevity raises. For Hornbeck's effrontery in suggesting that pay be tied to performance, the teachers' union (an AFT affiliate) launched a massive advertising campaign against him, calling him—what else—a "teacher basher."

That's when the Campaign for Public Education decided that the public needed some accurate information about Philadelphia's unionized teachers. The foundation-funded group began publishing a series of colorful newsletters with charts and graphs containing some amazing data about the existing union contract. One of these "School Updates" carried a headline that said "[Philadelphia] teachers enjoy one of the shortest school days in the nation—and Philadelphia's

schoolchildren lose." Next to the text was a bar graph showing the number of minutes spent at school by high school teachers in the 21 largest urban school districts in the country. Philadelphia had the shortest bar (followed by New York City). Another newsletter highlighted some of the contract's work rules, including the fact that "open positions in schools are filled according to a pecking order that favors [seniority] over all other factors."

The union's response was first outrage (including an attempt to prevent the newsletters from being printed), then embarrassment, and finally a more accommodating position in the negotiations. The new labor agreement signed last fall contained the provision that teachers who receive an unsatisfactory rating will lose their automatic pay increase—a provision that seems utterly unexceptionable to a normal person but is revolutionary in the context of teacher unionism.

Imagine that there were similar citizen groups in other large city school districts, continuously channeling information to the public about the myriad ways that teachers' union contracts affect the operation and performance of the schools and how teachers' union politics subvert the common culture that the public schools are supposed to transmit. Imagine further that the same citizen groups communicated with teachers over the heads of their NEA and AFT leaders, informing them that they are entitled to resign from the union and receive a refund of that portion of their dues used for purposes other than collective bargaining. Suppose that in New York City, every time the UFT ran one of its full-page ads boasting that it was working to improve the schools, it was followed by another ad by a citizen group describing in simple, factual terms how many hours teachers work under the union contract, how difficult it is to fire incompetent union teachers, how principals are forced to hire teachers on the basis of seniority.

What I have described is not fanciful. It is occurring in fits and starts all over the country and is bound to grow. The only thing that can prevent the teachers' union reform movement from expanding is the one thing the teachers' unions can't seem to deliver—a public school system that works.