

...Bashing teachers unions is a political agenda

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How's that working out? Have they hired a new group of teachers?

Cooler heads have prevailed. We're trying to work through it. You'd be hard-pressed in America to find a tougher place than Central Falls, Rhode Island. These children don't have the opportunities of other children. Opportunities outside a school affect what happens in the school.

In Central Falls, they fired all the teachers. Yet the way some conservative critics of education tell it, it's not possible for administrators anywhere in America to fire bad teachers, because teachers unions are so powerful. What's that about?

There is no place in the country where K-12 teachers have a guaranteed job for life. Tenure doesn't exist in K-12 education like it does in college. In K-12 education, it's nothing more than due process. Before you're let go, you have an opportunity to improve, and somebody else reviews it besides your direct supervisor. What people are saying is that's too high of a

standard. What the critics are saying is that they want teachers to be 'at-will' employees.

Our readers work in union environments, so they may be familiar with "just cause" discipline, or the idea of having union representation when you're disciplined. Employers have to make a case, and they have to take steps to discipline you.

That's right, but for most teachers, they don't have that right away. The average probationary period for a teacher is three years. For the first three years, they're at-will. And turnover in teaching is high. Nationally, in the first five years of teaching, 50 percent leave. It's a really tough job.

What does AFT think of merit pay for teachers, or pay-for-performance?

There's this belief that if you just put carrots in front of lazy teachers, somehow now they'll put their better teaching hat on, and go teach a lot harder because the money's there. That's such a business philosophy. It's total widget thinking. That's not how

schools work. AFT's position is that compensation reform can be part of a comprehensive approach to improving schools. In fact, AFT passed a resolution back in 2002 that proposed a common sense way to approach compensation for teachers. But there's a difference between "paying for performance" and just rewarding outcomes. In practice, most pay-for-performance systems just pay for test scores. And a huge study was just released by Vanderbilt University showing that these pay-for-performance systems have no impact on student achievement. It was a three-year randomized study of schools that did all the stuff pay-for-performance advocates talk about.

It's also said that talented individuals — from business, military, and other walks of life — can't get jobs as teachers because of licensure requirements.

I hear all the time that a PhD in physics can't get a job teaching in public school. It's an urban myth. Virtually every state has an alternative certification process. And the reality is that when Mister PhD gets into the classroom, he wishes he'd been through education classes and learned classroom management techniques. Classroom management is the number one reason teachers struggle in their first few years. If you think teaching is only about content, you don't understand teaching. I think making sure that people who stand in front of our children have been reviewed and certified is important. The problem is that people don't think of teaching as a true profession.

One of the assumptions of reformers is that the schools are failing, that we're in crisis and need radical action now.

When we do something too urgently, we tend to make a lot of mistakes. Then we have to go back and re-fix it again.

Right now, charter schools are supposed to be the silver bullet.

Charter schools are not new; they started in the early '90s. Every objective research study of charter schools says the same thing: They're no better, and on average they're a little worse. What this movie "Waiting for Superman" does is highlight several charter schools that do well. But I could find public schools that are doing the same things.

That's an interesting point. There are public schools in Portland that parents try to transfer their kids into from all over the city, that have three times as many applicants as can get in.

Why aren't those being highlighted? Because it's about a political agenda.

AFT has members who teach in charter schools. People think somehow the governance structure is some kind of miracle worker. Schools are good when they're run by good leaders, and have good teachers, and have community support. When you look at the schools that are successful regardless of whether they're charter or public, those are the things that make a difference.



Parker to chair WA Transportation Commission

Phil Parker, a retired member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48, was elected chair of the seven-member Washington State Transportation Commission. A resident of Vancouver, Parker was appointed to the commission by Gov. Chris Gregoire in 2007. The election was held at the commission's board meeting Sept. 21.

AFL-CIO calls for national day of action on Saturday, Oct. 2

On Saturday, Oct. 2, "One Nation Working Together," a new social movement of individuals and organizations committed to putting America back to work and pulling America back together, will be rallying in Washington, D.C.

But across Oregon and Washington, as a part of a national day of action called by the AFL-CIO, union volunteers will be fanning out for a massive Labor Neighbor push in Portland, Vancouver, and other cities, with union volunteers talking to other union members about candidates in the mid-term elec-

tions Nov. 2.

Events will be held in Portland at the Machinists Hall, 3645 SE 32nd Avenue (off Powell Blvd.), at 10 a.m.

In Vancouver at Fire Fighters Local 452, 2807 Fruit Valley Rd., staging at 9 a.m., with leafletting until 1 p.m.

Solidarity rallies also are planned in Eugene at 3 p.m. at the old Federal Bldg., 211 E. 7th, (7th and Pearl), with speakers and music. For more information, call 541-485-1755; and at the Capitol Building steps, 900 Court St. NE, Salem, at 9 a.m. to coincide with the noon rally in Washington, D.C.

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