

# ...Oregon Education Assn. leaders respond to assault on teachers

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form is driven by outsiders, rarely by people who have experience as educa-

tors. Educators are dismissed as having a vested interest in defending the status quo. But let's understand the status quo. Go out and observe what's work-

ing before you dismiss seniority. Go in a classroom with a 20-year veteran.

*The same reformers who argue*

*that teacher experience doesn't matter then argue that training doesn't matter either - for example, proposing that charter schools should be able to hire teachers who don't have teaching licenses.*

**Sanders:** It's patently absurd. You've nailed the contradiction. They tried to drive that in Oregon this year. We value young energetic people coming into the schools, but the idea that you could walk into a classroom and be an immediate success is completely defied by the data.

*There's also a push to separate teachers and their union. Reformers will say they love teachers but not the teachers union.*

**Rasmussen:** The union is a group of individuals together in a common cause. Educators want to have a voice in the things that matter when it comes to educating students. But around the country our voices our being minimized. People don't understand how we work, that we are a democratic organization.

**Sanders:** The polling is pretty consistent: Positives for educators are in the mid to upper 70s. After years of constant attacks on the quality of education, it's pretty remarkable. And in this climate, it's remarkable that over 50 percent have a favorable view of teachers unions. That said, we have not made teaching and learning the centerpiece of our work. Like a lot of unions, we've focused on wages and benefits and job security and members' rights. I don't think there's any question that the vast majority of union members — no matter what they do — are like our members: They take pride in the work, they acquire skills over time, and in most cases could do the work without all that much supervision and do a good job. Yet unions continue to focus on wages, benefits, and member rights. Those things are immensely important. But we've conceded too much of the control of the work we do.

*We haven't talked about what many reformers regard as a magic bullet - charter schools. What's your position on charter schools?*

**Rasmussen:** I think it's incredible that we siphon funds out of the public schools to fund charter schools, when we don't seem to find funds to adequately fund and support schools for all

kids.

**Sanders:** The evidence is in, and it shows that the vast majority of charter schools perform no better and in many cases do worse than traditional public schools. Research also demonstrates that when charter schools are successful it's because they winnow out students who are problematic.

The thing that's really heartbreaking about this is that the charter school movement was begun 20-some years ago by public school educators as a space to try out all kinds of innovations. But by the mid '90s when the voucher movement had failed, charter schools became the pet of the corporate sector that's trying to drive education reform in a particular direction, to undermine public education and weaken all unions. Charter schools were originally intended to be laboratories for innovation that would be brought into the public schools. Now they're an opportunity for entrepreneurship in education, which is a dangerous path to be going on. There are big investors in it because there's a lot of money to be made. We saw the next step in that evolution here in Oregon this year with the online charter school bill, which funds for-profit online charter schools. That's the next step in the evolution of this movement — an opportunity for people to make money off education.

*Pretty soon we can just employ instructors in India to teach our kids via Skype.*

**Sanders:** [Laughs] That's where we're going.

*Should all union members, all working people, be concerned about attacks on the teachers union?*

**Rasmussen:** Yes.

**Sanders:** Think about it. At this point, public sector unions are the largest unions left in the state. We've seen it in other states, the assault on public sector unions. But our members are middle class workers. Ours is a struggle not just to defend our union, but all unions; not just to defend public education, but to defend public services; not just our members, but working people and the labor movement. We have a good relationship with other unions in the state, and we're all coming together around ballot measures. I think we're getting ready to go on the offense and not be on the defense any more.

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## U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley

Paid for and authorized by Jeff Merkley for Oregon



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