



School Employee Unions Oppose School Choice to Protect Their Turf

by Matthew J. Brouillette

Summary

A new study of union membership rates among Michigan public, charter, and private school teachers reveals that unions have powerful political and financial incentives to oppose school choice proposals including voucher and tuition tax credit plans.

Main text word count: 724

If Al Capone had tried to warn Chicago that a competing bootlegger was selling bad liquor, the press and public would have giggled at the display of mock public spiritedness. They would have known he was only trying to protect his turf.

When public servants do this, it is a little harder to believe. And not as funny.

Our state's school employee unions are warning of dire consequences if Michigan parents are allowed greater freedom to choose which schools their children attend, public or private. While it may not sound like the end of the world to you or me, proclamations of doom coming from the Michigan Education Association (MEA), and the Michigan Federation of Teachers (MFT) sound as if public education is threatened as never before.

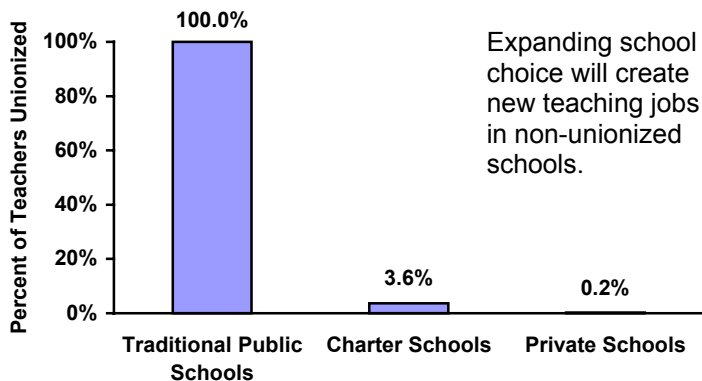
What is really threatened is not public education, or teachers, or students, or school funding: It is the unions' political and financial dominance of government-operated schools in Michigan, i.e., their turf.

The Mackinac Center for Public Policy recently conducted a survey to see how school choice might affect school employee union membership. We wanted to know how successful the MEA and MFT have been in unionizing private and charter school teachers. We then compared that success to unionization in traditional public schools. If the rates were close, we surmised, school choice would pose no threat to union membership, and therefore no threat to union financial and political clout.

What we discovered was an astounding disparity: To date, all 583 Michigan public school districts have unionized teachers, but only five out of 139 charter schools and only 2 of more than 1,000 private schools have been unionized. School employee unions have been almost totally unable to organize charter and private school employees.

continued on back

Comparing Unionization Rates in Three Types of Michigan Schools



This means that virtually every child enrolled in a Michigan private or charter school helps create a non-dues-paying teaching job in a non-unionized school. Expanding school choice means the shrinking of union coffers and power unless unions change their approach to charter and private schools.

Why do charter and private school teachers reject unionization? Many say they are willing to trade the job security of a union contract for more flexibility, faster promotion, less paperwork and—in some charter schools—higher pay. They say their schools are more focused on mission than on politics, pay, and job security. “Unionism doesn’t drive private education,” said Glen Walstra of the Michigan Association of Non-public Schools. “Our people have made up their minds that money is not the primary reason they do their jobs. Service to the child and the school are more important.”

By contrast, the unions’ focus on politics has damaged the quality of education. As David Denholm, president of the Public Service Research Foundation wrote in 1994, “The collective bargaining process ... has not only made it difficult to encourage promising teachers or dismiss poor ones, it has forced many of the best to leave teaching for more financially rewarding work. The result is that the quality of teaching suffers.”

It is no wonder school employee unions are fighting to prevent the legislature from lifting the cap on the number of charter schools and to prevent citizens from voting to overturn the state constitutional ban on K-12 tuition vouchers and tax credits. If these proposals succeed, many more parents would suddenly have the means to choose safer and better schools for their children.

Union officials know many parents would choose another school because of problems in the public schools to which their children are now assigned. MEA President Julius Maddox recently said in a monthly message to union members, “We all know—and would be derelict to ignore—that some public schools today don’t work.”

Allowing greater school choice—from unionized schools to those in which unions have been unable to gain a foothold—would hit MEA and MFT right where it hurts most: in their pocketbooks.

If it seems hard to believe that unions would oppose school choice because of their financial interests, then believe the late Albert Shanker, former American Federation of Teachers president, who said in 1985: “When school children start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of school children.”

Until that day comes, it would be wise to keep in mind the unions’ financial and political incentives whenever they are heard making pronouncements about the dangers of school choice.

#####

(Former teacher Matthew J. Brouillette is assistant director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a Midland-based research and educational institute. More information on education is available at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and his affiliation are cited.)

Union officials know many parents would choose another school because of problems in the public schools to which their children are now assigned. MEA President Julius Maddox recently said in a monthly message to union members, “We all know—and would be derelict to ignore—that some public schools today don’t work.”

Attention Editors and Producers

Viewpoint commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications. Authors are available for print or broadcast interviews. Electronic text is available at www.mackinac.org or on disk. Please contact:

Joseph G. Lehman
Vice President of Communications
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
Midland, MI 48640

Phone: (517) 631-0900
Fax: (517) 631-0964

www.mackinac.org
Lehman@mackinac.org