

Reflections on My Union Experience

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Anyone reading this who expects to find an anti-union diatribe will be greatly disappointed. I have been, and am, a strong advocate of teacher unions and am a long-time member of OEA-NEA. I chose to write about my experience with my union because while that experience has been uneven and inconsistent, the sum of it all has meaning for what is happening today. The experience has been enriching and rewarding, and it has been frustrating and disappointing. I have experienced a union that once showed me the values and passion of teacher advocacy only to abandon those values in favor of a passive acceptance of years of anti-public school and anti-teacher policy in Ohio. My experience tells me that we need to help our unions restore their embrace of teacher advocacy and to once again accept leadership's accountability to its membership for advancing the well being of Ohio's teachers. While my reflections here derive from my specific OEA-NEA experiences, I believe there is ample evidence that my more general reflections and insights extend as well to OEA-AFT. I have followed the big-picture politics of both major teacher unions closely over the years and find NEA and AFT political positions to be essentially a distinction without a difference.

As I wrote in the personal message on *The Teacher Advocate* homepage, during my 12 years as a teacher in Madison (Lake), Ohio, I became active in the OEA, especially at the local and regional levels during the time when teacher advocacy was the OEA vision, a prime directive that was inviolate. As a union, OEA state leadership fought, and fought hard, for teacher advocacy. Unified dues, collective bargaining, master contracts, UniServe offices, the state income tax to help fund schools, and the right to strike were all accomplished during the time I was a classroom teacher. OEA's motto during that time was "*Together We Can,*" and together we did. But somewhere in the early 1990s, teacher advocacy began to die of benign neglect as leadership began a sordid romance with the political proponents of test-based educational reform and all that flows from it. We are where we are today, in large part, is because teacher advocacy was abandoned.

"Together We Can" was treated literally by OEA leadership during a time when leadership was a force for empowering teachers across our state. Teacher advocacy was animated by leadership's commitment to doing everything in its power *to educate the teachers fully about the critical school and teacher issues within the political context of Ohio*. Leadership and membership were in synch, and the unity of action that resulted is visibly evident in the incredible accomplishments mentioned above. Indeed, together, we did. If the history of OEA is ever written, the period from the late 1960s to late 1980s will stand out as the most generative and most proactive period of teacher advocacy activism ever accomplished.

When my union experience started, I was more or less politically a liberal Republican skeptical of the apparent radicalism of unions. But the reality of how powerless teachers were at the time I was entering the profession quickly made that apparent radicalism understandable and reasonable to me. The leadership sessions offered by OEA, the regional meetings, and the time spent as a delegate at the Representative Assemblies were all educative experiences helping me to wholly embrace teacher advocacy and the union.

My time serving my local association as a building representative, policy committee chair, and eventually president, brought the harsh realities of school-board paternalism into sharp focus. The one-sided contracts where school boards set the policies and then adjudicated and resolved all grievances against them became a cause for my teacher advocacy. Personal days were granted or denied based upon cronyism and all requests had to have a specific reason. Our salary index had no logic to it whatsoever because it had been used by the administration to reward certain favorites. Planning time was not guaranteed and unpaid substituting for another teacher during planning time was required when requested. There was a severe salary inequality between women's coaches and men's. The board would not even consider granting sick leave for the birth of a child.

With OEA's leadership and membership education, our local vision soon became to secure a master contract with binding arbitration in the grievance procedure, something not easy to accomplish at a time in

Ohio when teachers were jailed for striking. I was association president at the time we began to work on securing the master contract and was on the negotiating team that presented the initial master contract proposal. I was shaped by my need to know, and OEA personnel and resources filled that need well. The singular most empowering resource was our UniServe person, Dr. Charles J. Leberknight, who was incredibly intelligent and fluent in every aspect of school law and in contract negotiation strategies. He taught me the specifics of being a teacher advocate, knowledge and values I still hold dear today. Leberknight believed that the rank and file needed to know what was going on at any given time at the state and local levels. He believed that teacher advocacy started with the integrity and honesty of leadership. He held a principle that said, *If you are doing anything as a leader that you don't want your membership to know, then you should not be doing it*—a principle needed to be reclaimed and practiced today.

My career path eventually took me into higher education at Youngstown State University as a faculty member in the College of Education. Though I initially taught undergraduate courses, my interest and passion was in graduate studies in education. The bulk of my teaching time at YSU was teaching graduate courses for teachers and administrators. As a professor of graduate studies, I encouraged a sense of teacher and public school advocacy in my students. I also listened closely to their thoughts and feelings about how educational reform was affecting them. Most importantly, I worked to give them the opportunity to learn the critical issues of professionalism, the expose' and critique of reform mandates and the political context that shapes them.

To make a very long evolving story very short, with every new class, my students expressed greater worry and more confusion about what was happening to them. They wanted to know why their professional worlds were being altered drastically. The only explanations they had were the shallow propaganda slogans the reformists were peddling to the media for public consumption. There was simply no reflective critique, no voices challenging No Child Left Behind or the cascading, anti-teacher, anti-public school mandates that inundated them. For the educators in high poverty schools, the isolation and alienation was palpable with very good, dedicated teachers feeling lost amid the very public, state-mandated accountability reports accusing them of being incompetent failures. Equally disturbing were those in the wealthier schools who were becoming a bit smug because the accountability reports showed them to be excellent. Neither group understood that teachers in low performing schools were no more the cause of low-performance than those in high-performing schools were of performance success.

I became more and more concerned at how far removed my graduate students were from understanding the real nature and substance of the school reform mandates, especially in terms of their role as teachers in affecting achievement test outcomes. I tried my best to teach about the accountability mandates, especially the fallacies of standardized tests as the vehicle for judging schools and their educators. As I did, one thing was clear: the unions had failed entirely in educating their memberships as to what was happening. It was sad, but simple: my union was now accommodating the politics and mentality of the anti-teacher reform movement.

The full extent of OEA's abdication from teacher advocacy and its acceptance of the reform special interests in Columbus hit me squarely between the eyes in January 2000. I had just completed and verified my first quantitative study of Ohio Proficiency Test performance of 593 Ohio school districts across 16 different tests, revealing the tests to be invalid measures of academic achievement. Well before my releasing the study to the media, I contacted OEA and offered the entire study to the executive committee to use in the fight against the onslaught of school accountability legislation that was about to happen in early 2001 through NCLB nationally and in Ohio through Senate Bill 1 (SB-1) in the 124th General Assembly.

OEA accepted my offer to meet and we scheduled a meeting at the Youngstown UniServe office with the OEA President and members of the OEA executive committee. I invited an OEA colleague who was a veteran teacher in Warren City Schools to go with me. We ended up meeting for more than two hours with then-president of OEA Mike Billirakis and a few members of the OEA Executive Committee. The tone was set even before the meeting began when Billirakis and his entourage arrived nearly two hours late apparently, as I learned later, hoping we would give up and leave before they arrived.

My 2000 research showed the Ohio tests to be extremely invalid as measures of any form of academic achievement, that the tests were almost entirely a function of the life outside of school that the test taker experienced growing up. With that in mind, I urged the union leadership to promote a viable definition of what professional accountability should mean so that Ohio's teachers could be vigilant toward any attempts to impose a system of pseudo accountability upon Ohio's educators. The offer of my research study, my data, my analysis, my recommendations, and my express willingness to do anything OEA wished, was given to Billirakis and his group. Billirakis and the OEA Executive Committee completely ignored all of the offerings. Indeed, within several months of the study's release to the media, Billirakis actually wrote a ridiculously uninformed piece criticizing my study and rejecting it outright, circulating it widely across the state via email.

There is much more I could reveal about Billirakis and his efforts to hide my revelations from the OEA membership, but I do not wish to belabor events so far in the past. Suffice it to say that his leadership position was totally accepting of the positions held by Governor Taft, the Republican-dominated legislature, and State Superintendent Susan Zelman. My deep dismay was that OEA, through Billirakis, was embracing anti-teacher and anti-public-school policies and, worse, was peddling the reform fictions as truth, often in the form of silence, to the OEA membership. The ultimate reality of this situation came home to roost when in 2001 a colleague and I provided over an hour of opponent testimony against SB-1, the omnibus school accountability legislation, to the Ohio Senate Education Committee, knowing that OEA had just previously offered proponent testimony to the same committee. I still find it sadly ironic that OEA facilitated the passage of the key legislation that brought us to where we are today.

With the election of Kasich and his cadre of Republican legislative extremists in 2010, the flow of anti-teacher rhetoric increased exponentially as did the newest legislation that Ohio public school teachers are now suffering from. With the exception of OEA's pushback against SB 5 in concert with Ohio's other public employee unions, the tacit acceptance of the Republican legislation and policy against public schools and their educators, especially teachers, has been met primarily with silence overall. Leadership is not voicing the concerns of their members nor listening to their questions and concerns.

No one hears the voice of our classroom teachers because no one gives voice to them and no one stands resolute and unwavering as their advocate amid the false claims of the special-interest groups and their toadies, the politicians. The traditional sources of teacher advocacy have been silent as their memberships have been cast adrift to suffer the professional and personal indignities of Ohio's system of pseudo accountability, which is best exemplified by OTES. As the public has been equally misled into buying into the irrational and counter-productive accountability system, the absence of teacher advocacy is even more conspicuous, and the silent culpability of those who know better becomes even more appalling.

The past notwithstanding, as a committed teacher advocate, I believe the time is now for us to help OEA and OFT to recapture the vision of teacher advocacy with proactive and aggressive initiatives to create a truly authentic educational accountability system for the educators, students, and citizens of Ohio. The ironic truth of the matter is that just as we envision authentic accountability for educators, union leadership must once again accept their own authentic accountability and embrace responsibility for fully advocating its membership.