

Teachers' unions focus on politics rather than educating children

The 'can't do' attitude of unions gets in the way, while charter schools remain in crosshairs

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The academic year had not yet begun and teachers' unions in many states already were complaining about the workload — arguing, in the era of COVID-19-induced Zoom classes, that teachers should be required to work no more than an hour or so online per day. This, after also complaining that schools should remain closed because it isn't safe to reopen them.

As Dana Goldstein and Eliza Shapiro wrote in *The New York Times*, the “can't do” reaction of the unions comes at a time when “parents are desperate for teachers to provide more interactive, face-to-face instruction this fall, both online and, where safe, in person.” Instead, many teachers' unions, while publicly focusing on the safety of classrooms, are simultaneously “fighting to limit the amount of time” that teachers are required to interact with students online. They can't have it both ways.

In both traditional classrooms and “virtual” classrooms, teacher interaction with students is critical, whether they're instructing an entire class or providing individual feedback. That's why it's so disturbing to see the unions politicize this — making it just another bargaining issue.

If education is the objective, the result can be perplexing, such as the Southern California school district that agreed, according to the CalMatters.com news site, to limit teachers' online face time with students to “between 1.5 and 2.25 hours” per day. Granted that teachers need their daily planning and grading time, but where do all the remaining hours go?

This is the only face-to-face instruction many students will receive, especially those whose parents can't afford to hire tutors. No wonder many parents are desperate.

Isn't it time for the teachers' unions to start acting like the education of our children is more important to them than politics?

That might be a challenge. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) — and their state and local affiliates — are neck deep in politics. And their COVID-era lobbying is hardly restricted to slowing down the return to classrooms and limiting the number of hours of online instruction teachers must provide. They have much more in mind, as a recent screed from United Teachers of Los Angeles, the citywide teachers' union, confirms.

The 12-page wish list, published in July, begins with a declaration that UTLA seeks to address “the deep inequity and justice challenges arising from our profoundly racist, intensely unequal society.” From there the predictable

demands flow: Medicare for All, a “wealth tax,” “defund police” and, not to ignore education altogether, a moratorium on charter schools. To paraphrase President Reagan, there they go again.

While the demands and rhetoric vary from place to place, the one constant, this year and every year, is the call to eliminate or restrict further growth of charter schools, either directly or through heavy-handed “oversight” measures — a euphemism for strangulation by regulation — that will handicap the charters and make them carbon copies of traditional public schools.

The demand that politicians cripple charter schools can be heard from California and New Mexico to New Jersey and Pennsylvania. We even hear the same nonsense in North Carolina, where our state's high-quality charter schools traditionally have earned strong bipartisan support in the legislature, though not from district school officials, who see charters threatening their monopolistic fiefdoms.

Here in southeastern North Carolina, the organization I founded some 20 years ago now operates four Title I charter schools with more than 2,500 students from eight counties. Our top-scoring rural schools were the only area public schools ready to welcome students back to the classroom when the new school year began. We even offered parents a choice at each school: Their children could attend full time on campus, with a complete range of daily health safeguards, or their children could attend full time online from home, via Zoom and Google Classroom.

And, yes, our teachers are providing more than just a couple of hours of interactive online instruction, just as they do with students in their classrooms. It's not impossible when you have motivated teachers and the proper Direct Instruction curriculum.

The reason unions are out to “bust” charter schools should be obvious. Even during a pandemic, charter school administrators and teachers proceed with a “can-do” attitude, while traditional school districts, in league with teachers' union officials, focus on what they “can't do” — or don't want to do.

• Baker A. Mitchell, founder of *The Roger Bacon Academy*, which manages four charter schools in southeastern North Carolina, is a former member of the North Carolina Public Charter School Advisory Council, the state Charter School Advisory Board and past chairman of the North Carolina Alliance for Public Charter Schools.