

SPECIAL INTEREST: STANFORD'S TERRY MOE ON TEACHERS UNIONS

The high costs of failing public schools are well known and highly Terry M. Moe, a professor of political science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the distinguished Hoover Institution, has been writing about government bureaucracy and public education reform for three decades. His latest book, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools* (2011), is likely to be his most important contribution yet, and couldn't come at a more appropriate time.

In it, Moe exposes how teachers unions wield extraordinary power through collective bargaining and political activism, relentlessly pursuing teachers' interests at the great expense of both state budgets and children's educational outcomes. A number of facts stand out:

- In addition to anecdotal evidence (look up the “rubber room” and the “dance of the lemons” for examples) data shows just how difficult it is to fire incompetent teachers. In Illinois, for example, one study found the average teacher dismissal case cost school districts a whopping \$219,000. It's no surprise that an average of only seven of the state's roughly 95,000 tenured teachers are fired each year, only two of which are for poor performance (the rest for misconduct).
- Instead of adopting “pay for performance” incentives, unions have abused contract rules so that teachers only receive pay raises for “objective” criteria like seniority or a master's degree. But several studies show, surprisingly, that additional job experience and training do not make teachers more effective in the classroom. This means that large portions of the tax dollars spent on pay raises every year – for example the \$8.6 billion spent nationwide on salary bumps for those with master's degrees – reward teachers for factors that have nothing to do with student achievement.
- In the words of former public-sector union president Jerry Wurf, teachers unions are “political as hell.” The largest teachers unions (the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers) spent more on political contributions than any other interest group or corporation in the United States from 1989-2010, and by a wide margin at that. Of the nearly \$20 million that teachers unions spent in the 2012 election cycle, 97 percent went towards supporting Democrats.

QUICK FACTS

- More than three-quarters of the nation's 3.8 million teachers belong to a teachers union. The National Education Association (NEA) is by far the largest.
- Teachers unions spent more on political contributions than any other interest group or corporation over the last twenty years. In 2012, 97% of their contributions went to Democrats.

NOTABLE & QUOTABLE

What's important] is not solely that the teachers unions are preeminently powerful. It is also that they use their power to promote their own special interests - and to make the organization of schooling a reflection of those interests. Like all special interest groups, they try to put the best face on their activities. They say that what is good for teachers is good for kids. And as a matter of public relations, they need to say that. But the simple fact - and it is indeed just a straight forward fact - is that they are not in the business of representing the interests of children. They are unions. They represent the job-related interests of their members, and these interests are simply not the same as the interests of children.

- Excerpt from *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America's Public Schools*

• It's hard to overstate the harm teachers union foot-dragging on education reform has caused. Abysmal teacher performance has a strong impact on learning, which in turn affects the economy when young people enter the workforce lacking proper preparation. And estimates of the impact of education on a country's economic performance are huge. For example, if American students were as well-prepared as students in Finland, a country with more effective schools than ours, a child born in 2010 would see an additional \$103 trillion added to the U.S. economy over the course of their lifetime.

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Reports like these are clearly a vital addition to the public debate on what to do with public sector unions. Union representatives would have us believe that the “rights” they afford their workers contribute to work efficiency and come at little cost to the American public. But as officials across the country start looking for culprits for the massive deficits currently plaguing state budgets, they are undoubtedly going to find public sector unions’ costly demands and enormous inefficiencies to be no longer tolerable. As Jeff Jacoby argues in a recent article:

More and more taxpayers are going to find themselves working longer and harder, not only to provide for their own retirement, but also to pay for the risk-free, platinum-plated pensions of bureaucrats who earn higher salaries, enjoy more lavish benefits, and retire earlier than they do. Many Americans already resent the unfairness of this arrangement, and it doesn’t take a crystal ball to see the backlash that is coming (1).

We saw in Wisconsin the lengths public employee unions will go to protect their generous benefit packages and inefficient work rules (2). And as similar battles play out in states like Ohio, Michigan, Florida, and others, we know the teachers unions will be among the loudest protesters against much-needed reform. Moe’s book, at the very least, can serve as powerful ammunition to counter the unions’ noisy claims.

Endnotes:

1. Jeff Jacoby, What Public-Sector Unions Have Wrought, Commentary Magazine (October 2010) (online at <http://www.jeffjacob.com/8035/what-public-sector-unions-have-wrought>).
2. Maureen Martin, Anti-Walker Union Protesters Cost Wisconsin Taxpayers Big Bucks, The Heartland Institute Somewhat Reasonable Blog (April 26, 2011) (online at <http://blog.heartland.org/2011/04/anti-walker-union-protestors-costwisconsin-taxpayers-big-bucks/>).

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