



Obama, Longer School Days & the Edu-crats

The teachers' unions, historically loyal soldiers in the army of social liberalism, are falling out of formation over the Obama administration's proposal to increase the length of the academic day and the days in the academic year.

Since his campaign for President began, Barack Obama has proclaimed that "we will change education in this country; and we will bring about a better future for our children." While broadcasting speeches directly into the schools is one thing, cutting into the profits of summer camps, theme parks, and hotels is a threat that won't be ignored by leaders in these industries. One segment of the economy that isn't going to take the changes lying down is the teachers' unions.



It isn't just the federal government that is threatening the once impregnable borders of the teachers' union empire. Local governments, cowering under the never-blinking eye of budget shortfalls, are considering drastically and immediately reducing the staff in their school districts. This pincer effect from both levels of government is causing many in the teachers' unions hierarchy to question their support of Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election. Obama's goal of longer days and local government's goal of shorter payrolls have combined against the teachers' unions in a one-two punch that is leaving them floundering against the ropes.

The unions are understandably worried that their ranks will be thinned by local lawmakers trying to eliminate expenses as revenues decline. To combat the sword of staff reductions that many predict will fall with a vengeance very soon, many teachers and their labor representatives are proposing "payless furloughs." Under this system, no teacher would be laid off, but all would mandatorily take off one extra day a week for which they would not be paid. While cutting into teachers' paychecks, it would obviate the need for wholesale layoffs. Furthermore, the union mouthpieces assert that three-day weekends will not only save money and thus save jobs, but it will come bundled with the salutary effect of having better rested thus more energetic teachers in the classroom.

Critics of the teachers' union's furlough proposition accuse the teachers and their unions of subordinating the educational needs of students to the pecuniary interests of teachers. Some opponents of the plan, many of whom are parents and student advocates, have proffered their own solution to the budget crisis equation: fire bad teachers. Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, supports this proposal. He told Fox News, "One good thing about rough patches is that they provide the motivation and cover to make difficult personnel choices. It's disturbing that rather than addressing this directly, school teachers and school districts are trying to dance around the real issue. Furloughs are a result of small-minded timid management." Moreover, the money saved



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by firing poorly performing teachers can then be spent on offering more generous compensation packages to good teachers, thus attracting more of the best and brightest from all fields of endeavor to the teaching profession and away from other careers that may be more financially accommodating.

There is much to be said for what may at first blush appear to be a drastic response to the problem. Yet implementing such a solution in the highly politicized and unionized public-school system is something else entirely. In today's government-fostered educational bureaucracy, critics charge, many teachers, who traditionally were one of a child's earliest examples of leadership, have abdicated this noble role in favor of becoming niggling managers and time table scribblers. Predictably, teachers and their unions formed in this mold oppose any winnowing of even the worst of those in their ranks and accordingly they frightfully erect the scarecrow of "due process violation" to frighten foes whenever the subject of performance based culls is broached by well-intentioned government leaders at any level.

One possible solution to the dilemma suggested by critics of the status quo is to adopt a merit-based, peer-reviewed scheme, wherein a teacher's job security is determined by both his peers' assessment of his pedagogical ability as observed in the classroom and his students' performance on standardized, locally compared tests. Proponents of this approach say that it would not only reduce the fiscal strain on already overtaxed communities, but would also have the concomitant effect of motivating teachers to improve their skills, and would even provide a sound and less refutable basis for firing teachers of lesser ability, lower ambition, and baser aims. Or to put it another way, the quick, inspiring teacher jumped over the lazy, dull classroom manager.

But is it realistic to expect that questions regarding what merit-based tests would cover or not cover, the ideological bent of the peers reviewing performance, etc., would not themselves become highly charged political issues? Some traditional-minded Americans, just as those at the Alliance for the Separation of School and State, argue that the true way to improve education is to separate school and state. "We believe parents, and not the state, should be in charge of their children's education," the groups says on its website. The group also approvingly states that eight million children are already learning free of state control.

But the Obama administration to wants move in exactly the opposite direction, giving the state more control over education, just as the administration wants to give the government more control over other sectors of society as well. Certainly, increasing the length of the academic day and the school year, as Obama wants to do, would make the state even more influential in the lives of public school-children.

Regardless of how the critical issues in this quandry are eventually answered, it is notable that as President Obama makes nearly daily reference to all that is to be recommended about his proposed national policy of longer school days and longer school years, a significant bloc of his most reliable allies are hastily constructing and installing procedural obstacles formed from the stones of their own narrow self-interest and an institutional disregard for the educational needs of students and the singular position that teachers — good, dedicated, inspiring teachers — hold in that arena. All Americans should be hopeful that our children are taught by those who are ablest and that government at every level will remove itself as much as possible from the situation and allow the unparalleled intelligence, reason, and hard work of the American people to address and work out an educational system and curriculum that is advantageous and beneficial to teachers, students, parents, and most of all to the perpetuation of liberty in the United States of America.



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