

Opinion Exchange

Commentaries are selected to present a range of perspectives and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Star Tribune Editors.

EDUCATION

Minneapolis Star Tribune

Trust parents, transform Minnesota

Oct 22, 2023 A13

They are the ultimate consumers — let them drive the system.

By JOHN C. "CHUCK" CHALBERG

Here's a question for parents: How often have you thought — or heard someone say — something to the effect that, "Yes, I'm aware that there are serious problems with our public school system, but my child's school is just fine"?

Yes, it is a system — a system largely run by and for Education Minnesota, the teachers union. From that standpoint, it may well be a system that is doing just fine. It may not be doing what it was originally designed to do, but in many respects it is doing exactly just what it is currently designed to do.

Parents were given a glimpse into the public school system's inner workings during the COVID-induced shutdowns. Many didn't care much for what they saw. How else to account for school board elections heating up around the state this fall? Is it really a case of book burners, racists and Christian nationalists on the march? Much more likely, parents of all backgrounds and views have finally, if reluctantly, come to the conclusion that things may not be "just fine" in their local school after all.

There comes a time in the history of every institution when a crossroads is reached and serious questions have to be asked by those in charge — or by others who seek to be in charge. Are we on the right path? Are we on the originally intended path? Is it time for some sort of course correction? Or is it simply time to stop doing what we're doing and chart a new course altogether?

A year ago, our governor ran for re-election on a campaign that included a pledge to "fully fund" our K-12 system, whatever that might mean. Any hint of even minimal reform was nowhere to be found. More money was the only answer. It always is.

Speaking of money, there's something fundamentally amiss about a system in which a union gives money to politicians, who then decide, directly or indirectly, the salaries of union members.

A different arrangement with money could jump start the process of charting a new course. That would mean vouchers or education savings accounts, through which taxpayer dollars committed to education would

be directed by parents to the public or private schools of their choice, systems that already are reality in many states.

When it comes to the education of our young, trust has to be placed somewhere. Parents should be first in line. This isn't exactly a call to "fully fund" parents, but it is a call to break up the monopoly that is the alliance between the DFL and Education Minnesota.

Admittedly, taking such a step would be dramatic, but it would only be taking each half of that alliance at its word. We are told repeatedly that "diversity is our strength." So why not let our increasingly diverse population choose diverse ways of assuring that parents have what they think is necessary for a good education for their offspring?

And while we're at it, let's empower those whom the DFL claims to champion, those of little means, here defined as those now unable to choose schools they might prefer for their children. Voucher and child in hand, let parents drive the system.

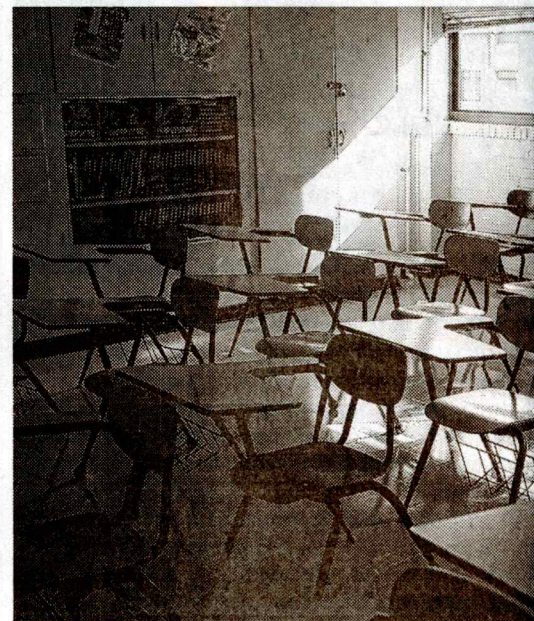
Such an approach might well come much closer to realizing the original goals of public education. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 initially laid those goals, and Minnesota is at least partially a Northwest Ordinance state.

That historic document, which paved the way for statehood for many states of the old Big Ten, clearly stated that since "religion, morality and knowledge [are] necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged." Provisions were then made to transform that encouragement into reality at public expense.

Provisions now need to be made for a transformation of a different sort. There was a time when our public schools were engines of assimilation to American ideals. Today they have increasingly become engines of accommodation to the agenda of one of the two major parties in our deeply divided state and country.

What has been called progressives' "long march" through our institutions, especially our educational institutions, has been underway since the 1960s. More to the point, that march has been quite successful.

Determining precisely how successful that march has been would require outside inves-



tigations into what is specifically being taught in classroom after classroom across the state. For example, in how many classrooms and in what ways are the theory and practice of critical race theory the order of the day? What is the state of sex education? Or of family education in general?

Such investigations would not just be unwelcome in the system. They would spur charges of McCarthyism.

What then can be done? Simply trust parents first. They are the ultimate consumers. Let them vote with their vouchers and their children's feet. Let parents, rather than Education Minnesota, drive the system.

There was a time when Democratic presidents voiced great concern about public employee unions. Franklin Roosevelt for one — John Kennedy for another. And those were days when no one could have imagined using the classroom to advance the agenda of one political party or faction. But those days are long gone.

Education Minnesota is here to stay, no doubt. There is also little doubt that the proper purpose of a union is to advance the interests of its members. Everything else is secondary, which is as it should be. Need any more be said?

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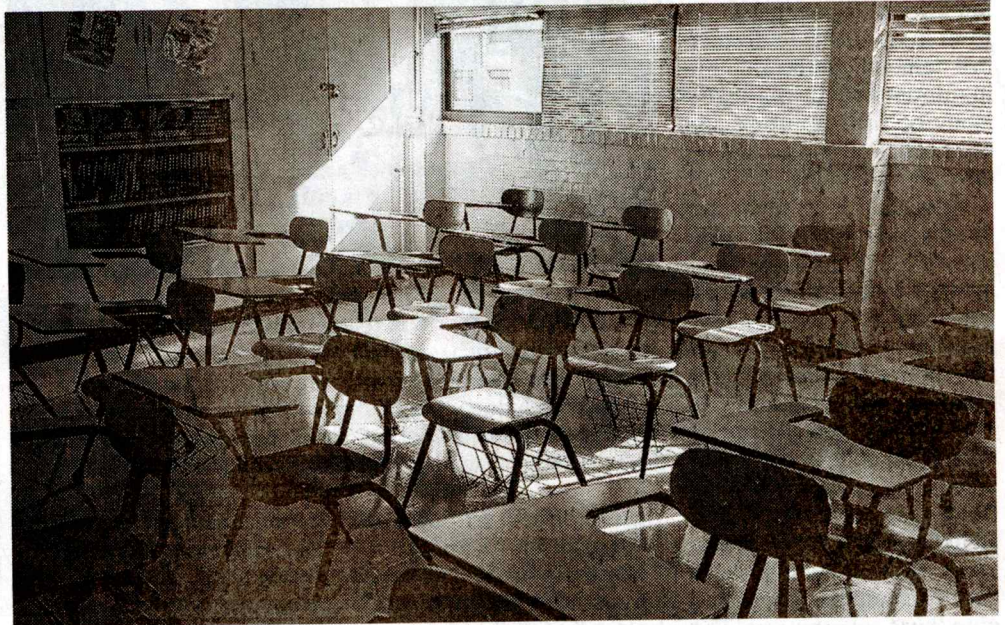
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This isn't exactly a call to "fully fund" parents, but it is a call to break up the monopoly that is the alliance between the DFL and Education Minnesota.

Just this. Education Minnesota is not just an arm of the DFL, it is the driving force behind the DFL. As such, it is also in the business of nurturing future generations of DFL voters, which is quite understandable — if not quite as it should be.

With the long march over, it's time for a long sorting out to begin. This very American process will be quite messy, but it needs to take place. And when it does, ironically, the central goal of the original liberal long marchers of the 1960s will finally have a shot at being achieved: Power to the people.

John C. "Chuck" Chalberg, who taught American history at Normandale Community College and was an MEA member before retirement, writes from Bloomington.