

Jim Klein on public education and unions October 24, 2023

Comment posted to MEA blog at Thoughts Towards a Better World Oct 20, 2023. Included are Dick Bernard's response. Jim and Dick have known each other for several years and are friends.

Dick,

Education policy is always going to be the issue upon which you and I just disagree. I think we've both known that for as long as we've known each other. At least you have the satisfaction of knowing that the vast majority of the DFL agrees with you!

One of the major "enlightenments" of my lifetime - a political awakening - was realizing that the legal organizing of public employees into true unions with rights to strike, which happened largely when I was a schoolkid, in the 60s and early 70s, didn't "work" the way most of its early advocates expected. The big argument for it was that teachers were underpaid. And they were. The expectation was that unionizing would improve their pay. And it did not. In my view, teachers are even more underpaid today than when I was a schoolkid. I'm not going to cite statistics, but I think the ones we have are supportive of that statement, and I don't know many teachers who disagree. Adjusted for inflation, changes in wage structures in other college-degree professions, etc, etc, teachers today are not better off financially than they were in, say, the immediate pre-union 50s and early 60s.

The biggest part of the reason for that is that it became apparent in the unions' first decade or two, that there was a fundamental difference between strike dynamics in public unions and non-public unions. A corporation must compete in a marketplace, with all that that entails, so the labor negotiation game is just different. A government entity can only pay more if it can tax more, which involves getting folks to vote certain ways on taxes and candidates. The early years of legal public employee unions are full of strikes that failed - and even more of strikes that succeeded, followed by districts that went into financial trouble. I live in Minneapolis, one of the few places around that is still living that dynamic today...! We agreed in the most recent cycle to a contract we can't make work (the money is just "not there"), and tough times are coming - probably involving intervention by the state.

But when workers are unionized, the union leadership must do SOMETHING for the workers to justify leadership's salaries, and what public employee unions have been getting for 6 or 7 decades now, instead of significantly better pay, is that the employees - or at least their union - has far more say over how the enterprise is run than was the case before. This is part of what Chalberg is talking about, and I think he's correct. One of the other "enlightenment" moments of my adult life - this one a parenting epiphany - came while my daughter was in High School - a "good" H.S. by the standards of the late '90s - and I realized by simple observation just how "lesser" her education was, than my public education, in a less highly regarded H.S., had been 25 years before, due overwhelmingly to factors that had to do with union control and influence replacing Board and administrator influence and control. The system had never been perfect (or even "good") before, but when I was in school, what happened in a school was much more in keeping with what parents wanted, expected, and thought was happening. This, again, is part

of what Chalberg is going on about. It's not new. But for a lot of parents, Covid is when they figured this out. I picked up on it already in the 90s.

Now, that daughter of mine has had her own daughter in a Charter for six years. I fully approve because I know what their public-school alternatives were. In fact, I volunteered to pay for private schooling, and as my granddaughter approaches H.S. age, I will probably offer again. I know that there is a "thing" about parents saying that "education" (in general) has suffered but "our own school(s)" are just fine. Personally, I don't get it. I chalk it up to too many parents who do not really KNOW what is going in "their own school(s)" to a good enough extent that they can make a good comparison to what they experienced, themselves. I was not an ideal parent in terms of school involvement as my daughter was growing up, but I was involved enough that I DID see the changes for the worse, even then.

By the way, I know I've told YOU this before, but for the benefit of your readers I'll add here that we started in Woodbury in '84, moving to South Minneapolis in '91 when my daughter was in 5th grade. And a part of why we made the move was how disappointed we were with the WOODBURY schools of that time. The problems I (and Chalberg) are prattling on about are not unique to one town or time (at least within the last 60 years), they are an American universal. In closing, I should remark that the ROOTS of the problems I'm referring to, above, are not unique to TEACHERS unions. They plague our society with respect to almost all public employee unions, to greater or lesser degrees. One thing that stuns me to this day is the accepted wisdom in our (yours and mine) shared DFL circles that teachers' unions are "good" and police unions are "bad". BOTH have contributed to similar kinds of societal issues! Both sets of employees are still underpaid. Period. And they - through their unions - have way more control over how things work than they once did.

Since each of these kinds of unions is loved on one side of the political spectrum and reviled on the other, it seems almost forbidden - on the left, on the right, or even in the center - to point this out, but it is true. I firmly believe that we will not solve the problems we have in education today (regardless of what one thinks those problems are) OR the problems we have in law enforcement today (ditto), without first coming up with some way of getting past the unintended consequences of public employee unionization. The roots of both these huge sets or problems are actually quite similar.

To Jim, from Dick Oct. 25, 2023: Of course, there will be a difference of opinion between us. My entire life - literally - has been within public education - child, teacher, union staff, Dad, Grandpa.... But that's to come.

Recently I came across a August, 1972 photo taken after my Grandmother's funeral. It shows roughly half of her family at that time. I probably took the picture. The little girl walking away from the photographer in the photo was my daughter, now 54, and principal of a 1000 student middle school four miles from here, who's been a school administrator for over half of her over 30-year career.

In the photo are thirteen who were then, or to be, public school teachers. At least three others (one of them me) were there but not in the picture.

Anyway, more later. Thanks for weighing in.

Response from Jim, October 25: I have teaching in my family too. One of my sisters is an elementary teacher, and the daughter of the other sister is too. Annearle's maternal grandmother was a teacher for 50 years. I could go on - there are more once I get into cousins and such.

And this is where I part ways with a lot of the public education critics on the right. TEACHERS are not the problem. The system in which they work is the problem. And unions are only one part of the system that needs change. Since it wasn't a part of what you were writing about (and I'd already gone on way too long), I didn't even mention the university, Ed Schools.

Someone who doesn't think there is anything major wrong with American public education does NOT want to get me started on "the Ed Schools", but, maybe more significantly, that hypothetical person REALLY does not want to get my sister, or my niece started, either! And, of course, they attended Ed Schools and take continuing education classes designed by them all the time... And I think the only time I heard Annearle's late great Grandma Adeline use a curse word was once when she was on a rant about "the Ed Schools". (Specifically, as a teacher who had spanned everything that went before phonics, to phonics, she was incensed when the Ed Schools turned against phonics, which she saw as something close to a gift from God... Now, of course, the Ed Schools are most of the way back to phonics (with little or no apology!), and the major resistance to a full return to phonics seems to be coming, in just some districts such as NYC, from... wait for it... teachers unions. <sigh>)

Someday I should also tell you my story of getting fired in the mid 'aughts, after several years as a volunteer math tutor at St. Paul Johnson High, when a well-meaning student who was one of my biggest success stories made the mistake of bragging to her math teacher about my "way cool" methods (...which were not the accepted ones - They merely got dozens of students who weren't learning from their teachers, in their regular classes, WITH the accepted ones. past the skills exams and in some cases into college. None were radical. They were each basically the way I learned to do some operation or another, either when I was their age, or subsequently. I reasoned that if a kid wasn't "getting it" the way they were teaching it, and if I knew some different way to teach it, try it and see if it helps. It helped a LOT!! But I was told to stop doing that. Had to tutor the same way the teachers were teaching, even though my kids were in the program because that wasn't working for them in their daily class. I wouldn't. So they fired me from a volunteer program... <deeper sigh>

Response from Dick October 26, 2023: We seem somewhat an 'odd couple' – Myself, a creature of public education lifelong; most of my work career as a staff representative for a teacher's union; James somewhat the opposite. But we're on the same page in a couple of respects, At

minimum: we know each other and are friends for a fair number of years, and both value that relationship. Second, we each have a single vote in this messy democracy of ours, and we can exercise that vote both for state and many national offices.

Rather than arguing the case here, I'd rather give some general and hopefully reasonably accurate data as a springboard for conversation for any reader.

First public education is a huge enterprise in every corner of every state. It is a "public" institution. There is no illusion of perfection in such a huge enterprise.

More or less: in Minnesota there are about 800,000 students in grades pre-K through 12; served by about 50,000 teachers, and. equal numbers of other school personnel, in over 300 school districts with over 2000 schools. Perhaps 5-10% of the public numbers are assorted private or parochial operations.

Nationally, there are 50 million students, about 3 million teachers, and similar number of other school personnel. There are over 13,000 school districts and approaching 100 thousand schools. Like Minnesota, a small percentage of students are other than public.

The teacher unions nationally have over 4 million members total between NEA and AFT. Education Minnesota has about 80,000 members and is the largest single AFL-CIO union.

All numbers are general, but I believe credibly accurate.

Finally, public schools are run by the public – James and I and all of us – dependent on how we vote, or exert pressure on schools to do this, or not do that, etc. The potential for problems is infinite and high. Things happen. But we mostly all show up, and do the best we can..

Let's keep talking.