

## **An Open Letter to Educators— EducationMatters, October, 2001**

### **Teacher Choice**

By Alveda King Former public school teacher, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I have reluctantly concluded that the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) don't care that much about negotiating a decent salary for teachers, or improving our working conditions.

What they do care about is becoming one of the most feared lobbies in Washington, D.C.

And what I'm writing about is to offer you, my fellow educators, a chance to inform yourself about these issues for free—and become part of a growing movement of teachers who want more choice in education. More choice of teaching opportunities. More choice of schools. More choice of who represents us.

You see, much of the "union dues" teachers pay doesn't have anything to do with negotiating contracts or other services. A lot of it goes to a top-heavy staff of lobbyists and political operatives. Together, the NEA and AFT employ more than three thousand officials at an average annual compensation of more than \$100,000. Much of this operation consists of political arm-twisters in the federal and state capitals.

This might be understandable, or even desirable, if the AFT and NEA were using this raw muscle to get us significant pay raises—or, to promote meaningful improvement in our working conditions. But in fact, teacher pay has barely moved up for a generation. From 1970 to 1995, when adjusted for inflation, the mean teacher salary actually declined by a little more than 1 percent. And it was in the early 70s that the unions infiltrated the teaching trade.

Meanwhile, overall education spending boomed. However, we didn't share in the boom. In fact, teacher pay indexed to per-pupil expenditures in the public schools declined by nearly 50 percent!

What would have happened if teacher pay had simply kept pace with the education spending boom? That is, what if teacher pay had held constant as a share of per-pupil spending? Well, I'll tell you: The average teacher salary would exceed \$65,000.

Let me repeat:

Had the NEA and AFT simply kept our share of the education pie where it was in 1970, then today, the average teacher salary would exceed \$65,000.

**Teachers vs. "the education blob"**

If all the money for public education doesn't go to us, where does it go? Largely to administration, overhead, bureaucracy, and other members of what William Bennett has rightly called the "education blob."

In fact, according to figures from the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States spends significantly more on such items than most other developed countries. In 1995, for example, 15 percent of all education spending in Japan was devoted to "nonteaching personnel." Austria, 16 percent, Italy, 17 percent, England, 18 percent, Australia, 19 percent, and Canada spent 20 percent or less. In the U.S., the figure was 24.6 percent—more than 50 percent higher than Japan.

These figures on pay and education overhead reflect what our unions don't care about—bread-and-butter teacher concerns. They also help illustrate what the NEA and AFT do care about: Building a political empire, almost a kind of political party, at our expense.

Yes, spending on the public schools has gone up—along with dropouts, violence, and parental frustration with us as the most visible part of the education system. The NEA and AFT are effective at promoting the things they care about. They just don't seem to care as much about you and me as they do about expanding their monopolistic control.

"I thought the union was going to focus on how to improve our skills," as Los Angeles math teacher Jaime Escalante—inspiration for the 1988 film *Stand and Deliver*—put it. "But they're more interested in politics than kids," Escalante continued. Or, apparently, teachers.

### **Merger Mania Hits Education**

This January, as if to symbolize their priorities, NEA president Bob Chase and AFT president Sandra Feldman huddled for days atop the posh New York Hilton and Towers to craft one of the century's most ambitious merger deals—their own proposal to join the AFT and the NEA.

A review of key documents released by Chase and Feldman shows there's hardly even a pretense that this deal has anything to do with helping teachers at the bargaining table. For example:

- A joint press release issued by the AFT and NEA in January, announcing the merger agreement, doesn't even address how it will help teacher pay.
- A 20-page document issued by the NEA on the merger, Q&A for NEA Members, similarly omits discussion of the issue.

"NEA president Bob Chase says a large national union would not mean more clout in collective bargaining because those negotiations all take place at the state and local levels," USA Today wrote (January 28, 1998).

If you're tired of subsidizing this kind of activity, or if you'd just like to have more facts about where your money is going—then here's something that may interest you.

You can receive information like this every month as part of a free, well-researched series of reports called Teacher Choice, distributed by the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, a public interest research foundation.

You'll get a different perspective on issues vital to your performance as a teacher, and valuable to keeping yourself informed on education issues. You'll also get updates on the NEA's latest activities and on actions around the country aimed at protecting your rights as a teacher and a citizen.

And you'll get positive alternatives. We'll tell you how some teachers have kept their union insurance and other benefits but have been able to stop making payments to the NEA's political lobbying machine.

We'll provide you the names and addresses of independent groups that provide teacher liability insurance, legal assistance, health benefits, and most of the real benefits of the NEA—without the politics!

Sincerely,

Alveda C. King

*Alveda King, a former public school teacher, is the niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She spent the early part of her childhood in Birmingham, Alabama, where her family's home was bombed in 1963. It was this event that launched Ms. King's active involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. During the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, she participated in peaceful demonstrations and nonviolent sit-ins with Dr. King. Ms. King, a staunch opponent of racial preferences, is the founder of King for America, and she is an outspoken advocate for school choice.*

Source—Alexis de Tocqueville Institution

Published in the newsletter of the Association of American Educators, Published in the newsletter of the Association of American Educators, “**EducationMatters,**” October, 2001.