

OPINION

On teacher freedom, Clovis sets an example for California

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By LARRY SAND / Contributing writer

Clovis, a city of about 100,000 located in California's fertile San Joaquin Valley, is home to the 16th largest school district in California, with 41,000 students, 47 schools, and 1,800 teachers. The student body is ethnically mixed, and about half its children are on free or reduced lunch. The city's website boasts that it is the "#1 City to Raise a Family."

Clovis also happens to be the "#1 City for Teacher Freedom," as the city's schools have never been unionized. Other California cities could learn from this example.

In the 1970s, when the teacher unionization movement enveloped California, Clovis superintendent Floyd Buchanan and the city's teachers decided they could handle the K-12 education process themselves, thus avoiding divisive union work rules that have infected almost all other school districts in the Golden State. While state law mandates much of what happens in school districts, including union imperatives like tenure and seniority rules, everything else is left to the local district – such as teacher salaries and benefits, curriculum, the school calendar and student safety issues.

The union insists that without organized labor, teachers would be treated like lowly serfs, tormented by principals, with no representation on professional issues and at risk of being fired for "advocating for their students." But that certainly is not the case in Clovis.

Teachers have a voice and a role in governance. Instead of a union, they have an elected Faculty Senate, in which each school has a representative. The mission of the Faculty Senate is to be "an effective advocate for teachers at all levels of policy making, procedures, and expenditures, in partnership with our administrators, fellow employees, and community as a quality educational team."

Teacher salaries are competitive in Clovis. While starting teachers make a few thousand dollars a year more in neighboring unionized Fresno, the differences dissipate as teachers rack up more time on the job. And, while Fresno teachers are saddled with forced payments of \$983 a year to the Fresno Teachers Association, Clovis teachers aren't burdened with union dues. (For about \$200 a year, Clovis teachers can join the Association of American Educators or the Christian Education Association International to ensure they have liability insurance and other advantages of belonging to a professional association.) Also, as Faculty Senate president Duane Goudy told

me in an email, “Our health benefits plan (we are self-insured) costs less and is one of the best in the state.”

And students in Clovis are prospering. As reported by the Fresno Bee in 2014, a study by Oakland-based nonprofit Education Trust-West looked at academic performance in more than 140 school districts and showed that California generally fares poorly, with most districts receiving either a C or D grade: “Of the nine districts surveyed in the central San Joaquin Valley, including Fresno, Central, Madera and Visalia Unified’s, seven received a C or a D.” But Clovis earned a solid A, having ranked in the top 10 for four straight years. Additionally, students of color graduate at high rates and have been steadily improving on statewide tests. All this, and they do it for less. As reported by Goudy, “Our district receives considerably less money per student than Fresno and 18 other districts in our county.”

The real lesson of Clovis is that good education depends not on bloated budgets, bureaucratic paper-pushers and stifling union work rules, but rather on committed teachers and administrators who are dedicated to their students first and foremost.

As we celebrate National Employee Freedom Week, the Clovis model should be studied by teachers in California and beyond. It takes a group of independent-minded and determined teachers to decertify their union, saying goodbye to the one-size-fits-all regimen of the state’s teachers unions and their local affiliates. That’s no easy task, to be sure, but it’s certainly achievable – and it benefits both the educators and their students.

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