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'Superman' debate: Waiting for the teachers' unions

By Larry Sand - Oct. 21, 2010

Among the recent rash of education reform movies to hit our nation's Cineplexes – “The Cartel,” “The Lottery” and most recently “Waiting for Superman” – a common thread has been the demonization of the teachers' unions. They have been portrayed as the key stumbling block to badly needed education reform.

The unions seem to be shocked and furious that they are portrayed in such a dismal way and have issued statements and news releases that the films are inaccurate, unfair and out of touch with what really goes on in schools and that the filmmakers are engaging in “teacher bashing” and should “talk to real teachers.”

None of the above is true. It is also worth noting that the unions have proposed no real constructive reforms of their own except for the tired old “We need more money” mantra. In fact, the public is no longer buying into the brand of reform that the unions are selling and have come to see that the reformers are on to something.

For example, the public is very much in favor of charter schools – by more than 2-1, according to a survey by the Education Next Program on Education Policy and Governance. Charter schools, which are public schools but without so much of the district and union red tape, are the stars of “Waiting for Superman.” Not panaceas, they can be shut down after a few years if the students aren't learning. But most are successful, according to a decade-long study in New York by Carolyn Hoxby, an economic researcher at Stanford. Only about 100 of the nation's 5,000 charter schools are unionized. Hence, teachers' unions don't like them and do their best to make sure there are caps on the number allowed in each state.

While the public has repeatedly shown overwhelming support for charter schools, with other forms of school choice it depends on who and how you ask the question. Vouchers – cash payments to defray the cost of a private school – have become less popular in the last few years, but “tax credits” and “scholarship programs” are looked on with favor. However, African-Americans and Hispanics are much more likely to be in favor of school choice no matter how the question is asked.

The unions fight choice wherever the legislation comes up because private schools are not unionized and, as more and more students leave public education, the union loses money because of a dwindling dues-paying base. The most blatant case of a union wielding its political power was in Washington, D.C., when last year, Congress, after receiving a threat from National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel, dutifully killed off the extremely popular D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, in which some poor kids could escape their failing public schools and go to a private school. This was no backroom threat; it was posted on the NEA website.

Pay for performance? The unions are hidebound by the archaic factory model whereby teachers' salaries are pegged to the number of years they have taught. Teacher quality is of little interest to union bosses. However, the public thinks differently. In a recent poll conducted by Time magazine, 71 percent of the responders said better teachers should make more than mediocre counterparts.

Perhaps the most egregious thing that teachers' unions do is to make it almost impossible to get rid of a bad teacher once that teacher has gained tenure. According to the Time poll, only 28 percent of people agree with teacher tenure. Bad or inadequate teachers, appropriately called lemons, instead of being fired are simply moved from school to school in a practice known as "the dance of the lemons."

At the same time, every state has some kind of automobile "lemon law." These laws provide a remedy for purchasers of cars in order to compensate for vehicles that repeatedly fail to meet standards of quality and performance. Hence, it would seem that the unions care more about the quality of a car than the quality of our children's education.

In issue after reform issue, the public has come around to the reform side. In fact, reform, which used to be the dominion of conservatives and libertarians, has crossed over and liberals and progressive are now embracing reform – one of the rare issues that has become truly bipartisan.

Kevin Chavous, an Obama-voting Democrat, leads a group of determined pro-choicers called the Black Alliance for Educational Options. Joe Williams, a former newspaper reporter in New York, heads up the Democrats for Education reform. Davis Guggenheim, the director of "Waiting for Superman," is an admitted "unrepentant liberal." And even Oprah Winfrey has gotten into the act, featuring a couple of shows dedicated to educational reform the week "Waiting for Superman" was released in New York and Los Angeles.

What does all this portend for the unions? They have been exposed. Having lost the war of ideas, but flush with money, they will keep flailing away trying to sell the public their tired old "more money will fix things" canard. As for their claims of teacher-bashing in the movies – nonsense. Good teachers were praised constantly.

"Superman" and the other films unflinchingly tell the story of why public education in America is failing. The unfortunate reality is that teachers' unions protect not the good teachers but the bad teachers. Teachers' unions are clearly losing the battle because they are out of ideas and the public is finally realizing that the unions are not about the kids or the quality of education at all. In time, the unions will be marginalized and education will be freed to educate children and allow excellence to return to classrooms across America.

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