PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM: HOW TEACHERS’ UNIONS ARE USING SCHOOLS AS POLITICAL TOOLS

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PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM: HOW TEACHERS’ UNIONS ARE USING SCHOOLS AS POLITICAL TOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Public education in America is in dire need of reform and students are being denied the opportunity for quality education. The method of examining public school reform through the perspective of teachers and their representation in teachers’ unions while tracing the formation and rise of the two national teachers’ unions determines whether their political mobilization has helped or hindered public school reform. Using case studies in California and Michigan provides the foundation for further research into the effect of teachers’ unions in public school reform by presenting two extremes of union power and the loss of legislative control. California has the largest public education system in the United States; the teachers’ unions are the largest in the state and are effective at the legislative level. Meanwhile, Michigan’s teachers’ unions have experienced a significant loss of power in public schools and on the legislative level. Through this examination the cause of the lack of effective change appears to be because of teachers’ unions. The unions have hindered public education reform efforts through their need to retain the status quo, which provides their political power and influence in
public schools. The collective bargaining process is the foundation of union control, through teacher contracts, and the main reason why teachers join a union. This process must be re-evaluated to give all parties involved in education reform the opportunity to implement changes in schools. In order for effective change to happen in American public schools, teachers’ unions must work together with legislators, school boards, administrators, teachers and reformers. Students, parents, and teachers must take an active role in reform efforts or endure the declining state of public education.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABSTRACT</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC EDUCATION AND TEACHERS’ UNIONS IN AMERICA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2: THE FORMATION OF THE TWO LARGEST TEACHERS’ UNIONS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3: THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION AND AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS: THEIR RISE TO POLITICAL POWER</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4: TEACHERS’ INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL REFORM: HOW TEACHERS USE THEIR UNIONS</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5: CALIFORNIA AND MICHIGAN: CASE STUDIES OF STATE TEACHERS’ UNIONS</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 6: PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM: CURRENT EFFORTS TO REPAIR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 7: A LOOK TO THE FUTURE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS’ UNIONS AND PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC EDUCATION AND TEACHERS’ UNIONS IN AMERICA

Public education in the United States is under constant scrutiny for failing the nation’s children. Inadequate teachers, rundown school buildings, mismanagement by school officials, and lack of government funding collectively are blamed for this failure. One thing is certain; it is not the children that are to blame, but rather the adults responsible for providing the necessary tools for these children to succeed. Teachers are in the classroom each day and are directly responsible for what children learn in school. However there is a component of the education system whose role is frequently overlooked. Teachers’ unions are taking their role in school politics to a new level by declaring themselves, not only protectors of teachers’ rights but expanding their involvement in education policy and the management of schools. As a result, teachers, schools, and most importantly, children are suffering.

Americans are granted the right to a free education in their state constitutions. There is a common misconception by American citizens that their children are granted a free, quality education by the federal government. However, the misconception regarding a quality education is an aspect of education reform that schools and those involved need to address. Complete transparency to students and their families, outlining academic
expectations, policies and achievements will enable parents and teachers to be more informed and consequently, active in shaping education reform in America.

Education reform is executed at both the state and national level, which makes it difficult to institute uniform change. State governments are generally responsible for three things: (1) laws regarding the mandatory age children must stay in school, (2) the standards for determining the quality of public education, and (3) the individual rights for teachers. The distinction between federal and state government is very important because each state has different rules and school systems. As such, federal mandates are almost impossible to be implemented uniformly or effectively across all states. In order to reform the public education system in America, each state needs the freedom to figure out what works best for the children within their states’ school systems and not be tied down by federal mandates. These mandates often are declared an enemy of public schools by teachers’ unions because they force schools and teachers to structure their curriculums around standardized tests which are the only measure to quantify the effectiveness of American public schools and teachers. With such a strong emphasis on standardized tests America’s children are taught how to perform well on tests, not how to learn. It is these mandates that strengthen teachers’ unions because they garner support from their disgruntled members by the weakness of the laws.

Teachers’ unions are directly responsible for representing teachers. But who is representing and protecting the students and their parents? Should the teachers’ unions represent these parties? Perhaps this is asking teachers’ unions to work beyond the scope
of their responsibility. However, since teachers are accountable to their students and the unions are accountable to their members, it is only logical that teachers’ unions should inherently be held accountable to students and their parents. Yet, this accountability to students and their families (which should be in the forefront of the teachers’ unions’ agenda) is lost. The lack of accountability to students and their parents is evident in school reform efforts and, “regardless of one’s view of any particular method of improving America’s struggling public schools (whether it’s school choice, charter schools, or rewarding better teachers with better pay), the tactic and rhetoric that teachers’ unions employ to block any meaningful reform is remarkable. Their motivation is simple: maintain the status quo—and the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars in dues.”¹ Maintaining the status quo is a reoccurring theme in education reform because many people involved in public education are resistant or slow to change. Teachers’ unions are funded by the dues that members pay and the more teachers that are employed translates into a larger number of people for the unions to collect revenue from, in the form of mandatory dues. It is in the union’s best interest to demand more pay for teachers because that will translate into hiring more teachers, and ultimately more dues paying members for the union.

Teachers’ unions have done a remarkable job of securing rights for teachers and school employees, most notably the right to collectively bargain teacher contracts. Now that these rights are firmly grounded in teachers’ employment contracts, the focus needs

to shift to improving school quality. Teachers’ unions are extremely powerful within schools because of their ability to organize and represent teachers when bargaining to meet their demands and secure their work rights. School administrators (who are not allowed to be members of a union because they are management\(^2\)), teachers, and teachers’ unions work collectively to ensure the demands of every constituent are heard, but current contracts contain hundreds of pages and usually prohibit any meaningful reforms to correct the condition of public schools. Teachers’ working rights are well deserved and should be preserved, but teachers’ contracts often make school reform a slow process because they do not leave much room for changes to be made to the operation of schools.

There is not one school reform effort that can be implemented in each school across the country, but proposed reforms need to be tested out with real students and teachers to determine what will work to turn this dire situation around. More public education funding is suggested year after year, but as the national public education funding has increased, the quality of the public education system in America has experienced a steady decline. Unlike the United States, “…most countries with expensive per-pupil government K-12 school systems do at least get graduates who can function satisfactorily in a modern, industrial economy without…subsidies from taxpayers. The

\(^2\) See the text of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 for more union membership guidelines.
Americans, however, get to pay at both ends of their education system…”³ The results of
students enrolled in American schools shows that the money American people pump into
schools, through property taxes and state budgets, is not a quick fix or even the best
solution for school reform. School reform needs passionate advocates who are willing to
break the status quo and produce real results for students, which means more than just
performance on standardized tests.

Teachers’ unions advocate for additional school funding in order to improve
public education. However, the money spent on strengthening the old programs is simply
unacceptable because these programs have failed to raise academic achievement. For
example, teachers’ unions believe that reducing class size helps students learn better.
There has been no evidence to support this theory, but smaller class sizes require more
teachers, and this additional faculty would increase union dues.⁴ It has been observed
that, “over the last forty years, as teachers’ unions’ revenues and political influence have
grown exponentially, educational performance has remained disappointing.”⁵ This
observation suggests that while teachers’ unions have gained tremendous political power,
this power has failed to translate into real gains in the public education system. Teachers’
unions use this political power to reinforce their own status rather than for implementing
substantial changes in public school operations. The power of teachers’ unions is the

³ Peter Brimelow, The Worm in the Apple: How the Teacher Unions are Destroying American

⁴ Ibid., 28-29.

⁵ Rod Paige, The War Against Hope: How Teachers’ Unions Hurt Children, Hinder Teachers, and
focus of this investigation into public education reform and whether teachers’ unions actually have their members’ best interests at the top of their agenda.

The need to reform public education in America has never been more urgent. Discussions around the country are heated, as the declining state of America’s schools become an increasingly prevalent topic of conversation. The time has come for an in-depth look into the root of the problems plaguing our schools, largely, how the groups trusted with the duty to supply schools with teachers are actually hindering school reform.

The future of America’s children rests in the hands of the public schools. If real change is not implemented, more children will drop out of school or continue to receive a less than acceptable education. The cost of this decline is tremendous because America’s future as a leader in the global arena depends on the next generation of children and their role in leading the country. Whether teachers’ unions can adapt and actually participate in helping more than just teachers remains to be seen, but a closer examination of their political activities and their connection to school reform is undeniable.
CHAPTER 2

THE FORMATION OF THE TWO LARGEST TEACHERS’ UNIONS

Trade and professional unions are the cornerstone of American labor. Unions pledge to protect the working rights of the members they represent. The teaching industry is no exception. It is a public service represented by several national professional unions. The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are the two largest and most powerful national teachers’ unions. The NEA and AFT combined represent more than three million school employees.\(^1\) To understand the need for these unions, how they came about and their rise to national power, it is necessary to examine their history.

Teachers have been organized in professional associations since the nineteenth century beginning with the NEA in 1857, known then as the National Teachers Association (NTA). The NTA offered teachers more professional rights, “but for most of that time it was a professional association, concerned with standards, ethics, educational technique, but not with bargaining on behalf of its members.”\(^2\) The NTA was known for “coordinat[ing] state associations by providing an annual convention where ideas, theories, and principles were discussed.”\(^3\) The early stages of this teachers’ collective

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1 See www.nea.org and www.aft.org for current member numbers.

aimed to expand the profession of teaching to effectively educate the growing number of American students.

The mission of educating all American children became especially important following the end of the Civil War. This was a turning point for the education system as a whole because the newly freed slaves valued education knowing how important literacy was to America’s advancement. The education system continued to progress when, “in 1867, the NTA won its first major legislative victory when it successfully lobbied Congress to establish a federal Department of Education to provide and regulate education in the coming years.”

The legislative victory would set the tone for years to come for how the NEA dealt with the changing political climate in America. The NTA’s growth continued throughout the years following the Civil War and culminated with the NTA officially becoming the National Education Association in 1870. Establishing the NEA was made possible by “absorbing three smaller organizations: the American Normal School Association, the National Association of School Superintendents, and the Central College Association.”

The NEA continued to grow and recruit new members, but as the turn of the century approached, teachers encountered new challenges to overcome.

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5 Ibid.
The twentieth century mandated the expansion of the NEA because members wanted a larger role within the union and in their schools. This included fundraising (mostly from dues paid by members) and campaigning to spread their mission to teachers across the country. Inequality existed in public schools from the segregation of white and black students to female teachers receiving less pay for equal work than their male counterparts. At this time, the NEA was still focused on improving the education system and sharing ideas. By 1920, the NEA became too large to be run without a permanent legislative board so they adapted a system of Representative Assembly (RA) with delegates from affiliated states and locals. This meant that the NEA would now have conventions at which elected delegates from various states and their local affiliates would attend and be more involved in the decisions made by the national union. With the 1920s came the Great Depression, which affected everyone, including schools and teachers. The NEA worked fervently to promote the ideals of a quality public education and support teachers during these trying times, with the ultimate goal being to rebuild the institution of public education.

After the Great Depression, Americans were dedicated to rebuilding the public education system (resulting largely because of the loss of funding due to a decrease of tax revenue) and the NEA played a pivotal role in this. The teaching profession changed dramatically during World War II and was largely dominated by women while the men were off fighting in the war. This was important for the NEA because women made up a

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large portion of the teaching profession and were still paid less than men and the working conditions in some schools were abysmal. The NEA worked to improve the salaries of teachers and the condition of many American schools. The union was seen as a crusader for teachers’ rights and the necessary catalyst for change. This seemed to be a ploy by the unions to assert their role as the sole resource for teachers’ to gain any meaningful changes in the public sector. The truth, however, was as stated below:

The role of the union as “protector” of teachers is ludicrous in the public school context. By the end of WWII, most states had passed extensive laws that guaranteed teachers everything from special free speech protection to strict due process for disciplinary matters and tenure. Moreover, state legislatures were becoming much more prescriptive about the working conditions of teachers and school employees.  

With the liberties given to teachers through legislation, it seemed that the role of unions would be severely diminished, but that was not the case. Whether it was teachers’ loyalty to the union that had fought so hard to make substantial gains (higher salaries, securing working rights, and better working conditions) throughout the first part of the Twentieth Century or the propaganda distributed by unions that the only way to gain rights is through them is unclear. What is certain is that the NEA continued to gain momentum and their power and membership increased through the 1950s. In the 1960s, teaching (among other professions) would be forever changed, as this is when collective bargaining became legal for government and public sector employees.

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The NEA celebrated its 100th year in 1957 and acknowledged the tremendous changes the public education system had undergone and the strategies for future improvement. In 1960, Wisconsin was the first state to pass a collective bargaining law for public employees,8 forever changing the way teachers’ unions operated in schools. Collective bargaining was never a part of the NEA or its mission until it became legal for state employees. As a result, government was open to unionization and collective bargaining in a way that had never been seen before. Teachers’ unions became more politically involved through collective bargaining and “through this process they acquired considerable influence not only over wages, benefits, and conditions of employment but over the educational program of school districts as well.”9 The gains made through collective bargaining were the driving force the union needed to create strong holds in schools, with school boards, and in politics. Through their financial resources, the NEA was able to influence the votes of school board members and members of state legislatures.10

Unionizing public sector employees was no easy feat. The law prohibited public sector unions because they, as rightly thought, would have too much power.11 This all

8 Ibid.


10 Ibid.

changed in the 1960s when President John F. Kennedy, by executive order 10988, gave public sector employees the right to collectively bargain. Also, it is noted:

In the 1960s, the scenario began to change because of two main forces: the beginning of collective bargaining for teachers and other public sector employees, and an influx of men into the teaching profession during the Vietnam War. This transformation of the teaching force coincided with the transformation of the teachers unions from a professional association to a more traditional labor union, employing tactics like work slowdowns and even strikes over wage disputes.  

The transition from a professional association to a more traditional labor union dramatically changed the way teachers were represented in their profession. No longer would the NEA and its locals simply discuss ideas and theories of educating, but it would also have the opportunity to bargain for better working conditions and salaries for teachers. The 1960s were not just about transitioning the way the NEA represented teachers on their schools boards, but also amongst their members. Teachers’ unions were still mostly segregated with white members belonging to the NEA and black teachers belonging to the American Teachers Association (ATA).

The NEA and the ATA voted to merge in 1966, which created an integrated union. Some local unions were slow to accept black teachers as their members, but this merger provided an opportunity for the national union to recruit all of the locals to agree with the national policies. Throughout the 1970s, the NEA became increasingly

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involved in social reforms and, more importantly, in political debates about education and teachers’ contracts. These reforms and activities shaped the NEA into the union that it is today, with a rich history in fighting for public education and those it employs.

Several regional teacher federations also existed during the formation of the NEA. Its fiercest competitor was The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which was officially recognized in 1916. From its creation, the AFT was radically different from the NEA in that they joined the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and promoted themselves as a traditional labor union. They aimed to represent the economic, social and professional interests of classroom teachers. A public sector employee union affiliated with the AFL was unheard of during the early 1900s and this affiliation ultimately led to problems for the AFT. Membership numbers dropped by almost half during the early 1920s because the courts and school boards discouraged teachers from joining the AFT and to revoke their membership if they had already joined the union. As a traditional labor union the AFT worked to improve working conditions for teachers, including better salaries, but this goal was stalled when the Great Depression hit during which many schools were closed or those that remained open could not pay teachers.14

The AFT fought for legislative rights for teachers, much like other traditional labor unions. During the early 1930s, the AFT rallied to get teachers tenure and by the

end of the Great Depression, 17 states had some type of tenure laws.\textsuperscript{15} A unique characteristic of the AFT is that they were very focused on organizing teachers to stand up for their rights, and while they were opposed to strikes, they knew it might be the most effective method for teachers to demand for their rights.

World War II generated new fears for all Americans. The Communist threat changed the way Americans interacted with one another, which affected the leadership of the AFT. Several locals were kicked out of the AFT because they were accused of engaging in Communist activities, which posed a distraction from the mission of the AFT. The loss of several locals, however, was not enough to deter the AFT from their dreams of expansion and of unionizing more teachers across the country. WWII also brought about opportunities for the AFT to become more politically involved and push for improved working conditions in schools such as giving teachers a much deserved salary increase.

Following World War II, the 1950s and ‘60s were a turbulent time in American history with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and workers rights movement. Since the AFT fought for the rights of all American citizens, they fought against segregation in schools. The AFT filed an amicus curiae brief in the 1954 Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education. In addition to integrating schools, the AFT demanded that all of its local affiliates be desegregated. Additionally, local affiliates that were not integrated had to send a report as to why they had not integrated or face expulsion from the national

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
union. AFT members were still fighting for equal civil rights in the 1960s, but now it was equipped with the aid of collective bargaining. The labor movement, including the AFT and its locals, was forever changed when it became legal for public sector employees to collectively bargain contracts.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) was a New York City local of the AFT and in 1960 they led a one-day walkout—the first of its kind in New York City public education history. In 1962, the UFT won the first ever comprehensive teachers contract. This was just the start of how teachers would be organized in public schools. As a result of the new teachers’ contracts, “the national AFT grew from fewer than 60,000 members in 1960 to more than 200,000 by the end of the decade.” This huge increase was due, in large part, to the success of the UFT in New York City and the contract the teachers were able to secure. The membership gains made the AFT a legitimate contender of the NEA for representing the nation’s teachers. The 1960s was definitely a turning point for America’s teachers and the AFT was instrumental in securing teachers’ contracts in schools.

Albert Shanker was elected president of the AFT in 1974 and was a key player in the education movement and the unionization of teachers. He was committed to improving education, securing teachers’ rights, and civil rights. Shanker was one of the

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16 Ibid.
18 The American Federation of Teachers, “AFT History.”
most recognized figures in education during his tenure as president of the AFT and was ahead of his time in many arenas, including his support of charter schools. The AFT was recognized for their tactics of getting teachers better contracts, and leading the way “through his speeches, his weekly New York Times columns and his work with business leaders, policy makers and union leaders, Shanker turned conventional wisdom on its head—and made it perfectly brilliant and sensible.” This dynamic leadership put the AFT at the center of many policy debates regarding schools and teachers and directed the way they would progress forward. The 1970s closed with union leaders becoming more involved in political issues and gaining political power on the national level. Meanwhile, “Albert Shanker’s courageous voice insistently reminded the nation that American teachers want higher standards…and good behavior in the classroom.”

The NEA and the AFT played critical roles in the transformation of schools (through teacher contracts, improved working conditions, and teachers’ expanded working rights) and the political mobilization of teachers to secure their rights to better working conditions and higher salaries. This was all made possible by the legalization of collective bargaining. The introduction of collective bargaining has been the driving force behind the right to teachers’ contracts and giving teachers the leverage to hold out until their demands are met. It also put teachers’ unions in a powerful position to compete with

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19 A discussion of charter schools can be found in the Chapter 6.

20 The American Federation of Teachers, “AFT History.”

the school administrators and school boards. The possibility for collective bargaining has made “public school teaching…an overwhelmingly unionized occupation, an occupation with virtually iron-clad job security….”22 Job security, secured by tenure agreements, is one of the factors that draws teachers to their profession and is largely the result of unionization.

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CHAPTER 3

THE NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION AND AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS: THEIR RISE TO POLITICAL POWER

The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are increasing what is already their tremendous political power through the right to collectively bargain for their members and are in a unique position in that they represent the majority of public school teachers. The political power these two unions have is a direct result of their ability to conduct collective bargaining but whether this negotiation tool has helped teachers, and if it is still necessary in the twenty-first century, is yet to be determined.

Teachers’ unions are at the center of the collective bargaining that takes place between public school teachers and administrators. The process of collective bargaining shapes teachers’ contracts and it is usually the point of contention between school administration, teachers, and teachers’ unions. Throughout the last forty years the NEA and the AFT have evolved in their methods and activities as unions. Today, “the union’s primary weapon is political power, not economic power. The union knows that the state will not shut down the school district, even if it loses some of its students due to parent dissatisfaction.”¹ The fact that unions represent teachers who work in a profession mandated by the government, gives the NEA and the AFT enormous political power and

¹ Frase and Streshly, *Top 10 Myths in Education*, 34.
influence. The danger of allowing teachers to unionize is linked to the power the union has for getting demands met, but “teachers, like firefighters and police, assume a public trust and cannot be accorded unrestricted rights to disrupt operations of essential public services.”

The power teachers’ unions have over the day-to-day operations of schools could prove detrimental to the public education system. Teachers’ unions have a vested interest in preserving the current system of operation in public schools because it benefits them through their influence on politicians. The political ties between legislators and teachers’ union leaders can make it virtually impossible for any changes to be made to the public education system.

Teachers, in most states, are mandated to pay union dues each year and it is these dues that finance the teachers’ unions. The revenue generated from these dues enables teachers’ unions to be heavily involved in political activities through campaign contributions, distributing propaganda regarding proposed legislation, and lobbying. The current focus of the NEA and AFT is on political activities, which are often aimed at more than just the education system.

The AFT is the smaller of the two national unions, with 1.5 million members and 3000 local affiliates nationwide. The AFT is built as a traditional labor union, which was solidified in the 1960s with collective bargaining. Their mission statement states as follows:

The mission of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, is to improve the lives of our members and their families; to give voice to their legitimate

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2 Ibid., 35.
professional, economic and social aspirations; to strengthen the institutions in which we work; to improve the quality of the services we provide; to bring together all members to assist and support one another; and to promote democracy, human rights and freedom in our unions, in our nation and throughout the world. \(^3\)

This mission statement is at the core values that the AFT stands for. The AFT is concerned about the teachers and other educational professionals they represent, as they have a responsibility to answer directly to them. Yet, since the 1980s, the AFT has become increasingly more involved in political activities whether they are directly benefitting their members or not. The conflict between the union’s mission of representing teachers and their political involvement is because of their support for candidates and legislation that does not always advance teachers’ rights or improve the public education system. Increased political involvement in activities that take away from the focus of the union’s mission does a great disservice to teachers and the public education system.

The National Education Association is the largest union in the United States with more than 3 million members. The NEA has benefitted from the ability to collectively bargain on behalf of its members and has done so successfully since the 1960s. The NEA’s mission is to “advocate for education professionals and to unite [its] members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in

a diverse and interdependent world."4 This mission statement was adopted in 2006 and is intended to guide the actions taken by the union. Currently, the NEA is deeply involved in local, state and federal politics, which can be seen in direct contradiction with their mission statement.

Political ties can help teachers’ unions promote quality education for all American children, but it is these same ties that protect the status quo and hinder the implementation of any meaningful change. The political nature of both the NEA and the AFT has developed as a result of the gains made throughout the late twentieth century, beginning with collective bargaining and teachers’ contracts. Today, teachers’ unions have morphed into political powerhouses with questionable practices.

Teachers and other professionals represented by the union pay dues and expect their unions go to the bargaining table to improve their contracts and protect their rights. The unions have to promote themselves in a manner that is appealing to their members as well as to the general public. Both the NEA and the AFT must lobby for the sake of public education, but this political lobbying often diverges from teachers’ best interests or political beliefs. The leadership of the national unions has developed a way of giving the perception that the unions always act in the best interests of public education.

Both organizations are highly effective lobbying groups at both the federal and state levels, and both aim much advertising at the general public, both to generate a favorable image of teachers and to get the public used to seeing education issues in a certain framework, favorable to the profession—for example, to equate more

money for the public school establishment with “an investment in better education.”

The lobbying done by the NEA and the AFT has achieved its intended results when it can showcase their philosophy for more public education funding as a main source of support for teachers and schools. Teachers who are only aware of what is in their best political interests, through union information are disadvantaged by this type of lobbying because they are misled into thinking that politicians who are against more funding for schools may give the perception that they are against teachers, which is not necessarily the case.

The lobbying currently used by teachers’ unions is a way of preserving the status quo because this lobbying is not aimed at directly reforming the public education system. The status quo means that unions have the power to coerce school administrators to meet their demands, no changes in evaluating teacher performance (which makes it nearly impossible to fire low performing teachers), and more federal and state funding to maintain programs that do not work.

Teachers’ unions are effective at maintaining and controlling favor with state and federal politics. So, where is the money coming from to do all of this lobbying? The money used to lobby (on the state and federal level), which supports candidates favorable to union agendas and protect the status quo, comes from the dues that millions of teachers pay each year. For example, “the NEA reported spending $32 million on political activities in its fiscal year 2007; the vast majority of the union’s influence…goes

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unreported.” These political activities include producing literature for union members, campaigning for or against candidates, supporting organizations, and backing pieces of legislation. Additionally, “in its fiscal year 2007, the NEA spent $80.5 million—more than 20 percent of its entire budget—on ‘contributions, gifts, and grants’ that largely funded left-wing and non-education-related causes, including drives to raise the minimum wage…” Many of these activities funded with members’ dues have nothing to do with teachers, schools, or students. Consequently, many of these activities are not reported to the members. This kind of support of political candidates and initiatives is out of the scope of the missions of both the NEA and the AFT.

Political alliances are a common practice in American society and are often the only method of ensuring effective legislation. For teachers’ unions, having political allies on the federal, state, and local levels is a tool to implement real changes in America’s public schools. As such, the NEA and AFT give “huge political campaign contributions [which] assure teachers’ unions favorable access to the seats of power in Washington and in the state capitals.” The NEA and the AFT generally give more financial and campaign support to democratic candidates, because they are usually aligned with the union’s agendas for schools and teachers. The problem with this is that according to a study conducted by the NEA in 2000-2001, only 45 percent of public school teachers are

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8 Ibid., 22.
Democrats. If teachers’ unions want to accurately represent their members, their political activities should reflect the makeup of all members.

The Democratic and Republican parties both have ties to teachers’ unions and sometimes depend on them to secure an electoral victory. For example, “in the 1996 congressional elections, says the Federal Election Commission, the NEA gave $2.3 million to 382 Democratic candidates and only $11,850 to 13 Republican candidates. The AFT followed suit, with $1.59 million to 305 Democrats and only $19,750 to 4 Republicans.”

This huge discrepancy in political spending has made it almost impossible, in some areas, to be elected without the support of the local teachers’ union.

How did the teachers’ unions gain this much political influence? Teachers’ unions realized they needed to focus their attention on political power if they wanted to have legislation passed that favors teachers and schools.

To attain political power, teachers’ unions shifted their focus to the national level at the expense of individual locals. Although, schools are generally controlled at the state and local levels, the federal level is where legislation is passed that will affect each state. Teachers’ unions decided, “rather than fight[ing] the same battle in thousands of school districts… it would be much easier to simply have Congress pass laws that compelled all states to comply. So the teachers’ unions simply set out to control education at the source.

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9 Center for Union Facts, “Political Power.”

of political power, at the top of the federalist structure.”

By leveraging large amounts of money to endorse candidates that favor educational agendas, the teachers’ unions have solidified their political strongholds. It is much easier to control local politics and schools once legislation has been implemented on a national level. Political control has come at a cost to lasting education reform, however, because the line between the political world and the union has been blurred.

As mentioned before, the NEA and the AFT largely support the Democratic Party. So who is actually in control of politics? Are the teachers’ unions so powerful that they can influence political leaders? It appears that, “the problem for children in the system is that the Democratic Party is so closely linked to the teachers’ unions that its candidates for office often emerge as the strongest advocates for a status quo that continues to abandon and neglect the educational needs of students.”

The political connections that teachers’ unions have appear to adversely affect public education and thus put students at risk for not getting the education they deserve. Both the AFT and the NEA have made it their mission to protect their members and students. However, their political alliances simply protect the status quo, making it impossible for those missions to be carried out. Regardless, it is clear that the NEA and the AFT are deeply integrated in national and local politics and their political support is often necessary to be effective within the public education system.

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12 Williams, *Cheating our Kids*, 108.
Teachers’ unions are involved in various aspects of the political system, through financial campaign contributions, lobbying for legislation, and endorsement of candidates. For example, the NEA endorsed Jimmy Carter for president in 1976 because he promised to create a Department of Education but since then they have endorsed each Democratic candidate.\textsuperscript{13} Political endorsements inform union members which candidates union leadership feels align most closely with in conjunction to the union’s agenda, but they can also be “opportunistic in politics when the ideological price is not high. For example, in 1998 the NEA Illinois affiliate endorsed George Ryan, a moderate Republican candidate. It was rewarded by commission appointments and other considerations after the election.”\textsuperscript{14} The favorable preference teachers’ unions receive from endorsing political candidates is one reason why they continue to spend large amounts of money to support candidates. Alternatively, local and national teachers’ unions may spend enormous amounts of money to block highly qualified candidates from office simply because the candidate may not advance the political interests of the union. This decision is made independent of the candidate’s qualifications and disregards whether or not their platform puts school reform as a top priority, simply because some of the candidate’s reforms may weaken the union’s power in schools.

Public schools are often controlled by the power struggle between local school boards and teachers’ unions and the unions typically dominate this power struggle

\textsuperscript{13} Brimelow, \textit{The Worm in the Apple}, 53.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 54.
because of their political allies. For example, “throughout Reagan’s two terms in office, the Democratic Party controlled the House of Representatives, and the party was closely allied with the two national teachers’ unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).”  

The AFT and NEA forge political alliances to guarantee that they will have control over legislation. This is yet another example of the power teachers’ unions have garnered since their rise in the 1960s and ‘70s and how they use this power to their advantage to control the public education system.  

The power that teachers’ unions have in the education and political systems is unlike anything seen with any other special interest groups. This is potentially dangerous because schools are public and accessible to every American, and this large member base is what enables teachers’ unions to maintain such an influential position. The former executive secretary of the NEA said in 1967 that the “NEA will become a political power second to no other special interest…NEA will organize this profession from top to bottom into logical operational units that can move swiftly and effectively and with power unmatched by any other organized group in the nation.”  

This ambitious goal has surpassed all union expectations in the past 40 years. Teachers’ unions have “remained focused on this overriding political goal. And that has meant embracing techniques,  

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tactics, policies, and positions that have almost nothing to do with improving American education.”17 The political gains the teachers’ unions have acquired since the 1960s have put them in a position where they are arguably the largest and most influential union and special interests group in America.

Retaining political power is now the top priority for teachers’ unions: “Such misplaced energy reveals a structure that puts power and politics first, liberal crusades second, teachers’ needs third, and children’s needs for a good education last.”18 The need for retaining political power has completely consumed the top leadership of the national unions, pushing aside teachers’ needs. If union leaders are intensely focused on political lobbying, then who is working on behalf of the teachers?

The complicated relationship between unions and school administrators, along with the unions’ political ties, has created a toxic environment for America’s schools. Teachers’ unions are looking out for their own interests, without considering whether those interests conflict with teachers, schools, or students. When you have a firmly established system that is not improving, such as the case with public schools, radical change is necessary. Although, teachers’ unions have made real gains in the American public education system, they are also blocking some of the proposed reforms that threaten their interests.19 The interests of teachers’ unions’ leadership and the teachers

17 Ibid., 25.
18 Ibid., 118.
19 Ibid., 38.
they represent are no longer aligned. The future of America’s schools depends on the re-alignment of these interests and giving teachers a stronger voice in changing the education system. This reallocation of power will inevitably result in the union losing some of its political control over schools, school boards, and local and federal politics. Given their current political dominance, it is uncertain whether teachers’ unions will ever be able to relinquish some of this power for the greater good of saving public education.
Teachers join teachers’ unions for a variety of reasons. Membership in a union provides teachers with the opportunity to collectively bargain for benefits such as salary increases or the scope of their responsibilities inside the classroom and gives them protection against unjust termination. Teachers in many states need their unions to implement any reform in schools. Teachers’ unions are often the only resource teachers have to communicate ideas to school boards and school administrators about what they need for children to be successful in their classrooms.

Teachers depend on their unions to fight for salary increases and for rights guaranteed to them through their bargained contracts and “in almost every state, teachers are automatically signed up to have their dues money diverted to their unions’ political funds,”1 which means that teachers pay mandated dues under the assumption that they will go towards union activities that will benefit members. The dues that teachers pay go to a variety of areas within the teachers’ unions, but the benefit of belonging to the union is that members have a say in who is representing them at the bargaining table and in the

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event that they need to file a grievance against the school or school board, there is union protection.

The US Supreme Court has ruled that no American can be forced to join a union in order to get or keep a job, but teachers’ unions have found a way around this. Teachers are forced to pay an “Agency Shop” fee for the representation they receive from the union, whether they want to or not: “In twenty-one states, the Teacher Trust [unions] can bargain to have these non-union teachers forced to contribute fees to the union, on the theory that they would otherwise be ‘free riders,’ benefiting from but not paying for the union’s heroic efforts on their behalf.”\(^2\) Forcing teachers to pay for union representation strengthens the union’s hold on public schools because they get money from every teacher in the bargaining unit. Non-union teachers are only required to pay their “fair share” of the bargaining costs, which does not include the union’s political spending; “however, the ‘fair share’ has recently been running at between 70 and 90 percent of full union dues, arguably because the union has gotten better at burying its political activity.”\(^3\) Teachers generally decide to join their unions because they know they will have to pay essentially almost full dues either way. Teachers can use their membership in the union to require more disclosure of political activities or to have their interests placed at the top of the union agenda.


\(^3\) Ibid., 79.
Funding Teachers’ Unions

Teachers’ unions represent the teachers who fund them, through their dues, and they are directly responsible to the teachers, not the schools, students or parents.

Teachers unions have an obligation to fight for their dues-paying members, and their interests must be focused there. The unions obtain their power in many ways, namely through negotiating successive labor pacts (which often accumulate protections over the years in lieu of adequate pay raises) and by actively working local, state, and national political networks. The connections to local, state and national political networks make the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) impenetrable to outsiders. It is because of this political power that teachers choose to join their local unions and depend on them for protection. However, with no other alternative, teachers are stuck relying on unions that may no longer act in their best interest.

The Role Of Teachers’ Unions In The Teaching Salary Debate

The teaching profession is plagued with varying opinions about salary and why America’s teachers are not making more money, given their instrumental role in educating the future generations of American children. Teachers’ unions are strong advocates for raising teachers’ salaries. Research has shown that collective bargaining has improved teacher pay and benefits, which is a direct result of union membership. Teachers’ unions have bargained to have salary increases put into teacher contracts across

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4 Williams, *Cheating our Kids*, 77.

the country, but more bargaining means deeper union involvement. Once pay increases are in teachers’ contracts there is less need for union involvement and “to make matters worse, our teachers have had to swallow significantly higher, and often mandatory, union dues to support these free-spending bureaucracies—giving them even fewer take-home dollars.”

6 Are the teachers’ unions putting their members’ interests first? It appears that while teachers’ unions are instrumental in getting teachers pay increases, they are not effective in giving teachers more actual take-home pay.

Salary increases are often tied to teacher quality, which unions strongly oppose. The idea behind using assessment standards to determine effectiveness comes from the belief that highly qualified people are not entering the teaching profession because of the low salary. Teachers’ unions believe that higher salaries would attract qualified people from other professions to teaching and to fill the void in much needed subjects, such as math and science. The teachers’ unions do not believe that pay increases should be based on anything other than seniority; this would force competition between teachers and disrupt the status quo. The issue with using higher salaries to improve teacher quality is as follows:

Using higher wages to improve the quality of workforce depends on being able to distinguish high-quality candidates from low-quality candidates. High salaries will also attract hordes of the unqualified. But the government school system has an abysmal record of filtering them out….High wages could also be used to

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improve workforce quality by paying more for teachers of subjects that are hard and in demand, like math.\textsuperscript{7}

Teachers’ unions are adamantly opposed to linking teacher salary to job performance. This assessment only lowers the quality of American schools by having students taught by under qualified or inadequate teachers. Teachers’ unions’ actions directly affect children in schools because they support their members—the teachers—and teachers are responsible for educating America’s children. The belief that unionism in the public sector leads to unacceptable abuse is present in the unions’ stance on linking teacher quality to salary.\textsuperscript{8}

Teacher Quality And Job Performance Standards

Teacher quality is a highly debated issue in the public school arena. The discussion is always whether it is larger class sizes or the quality of the teachers in schools that is hurting children more. Eric Hanushek, of Stanford University, has done extensive educational research and concluded that, “Teacher quality is much, much more important [than class size]. Variations in teacher quality across classrooms simply dominate everything. In other words, the choice between a good teacher in a large class and a mediocre teacher in a small class is pretty clear.”\textsuperscript{9} The research on class size and teacher quality goes against what unions promote. One reason why teachers’ unions oppose job performance as a factor in salary calculations is because it would mean

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 29.
employing less teachers and a loss of dues-paying members for the union. If class size is used as a factor in the declining performance of students then the union sees two beneficial results. First, smaller class sizes would result in the hiring of more teachers, which means more dues paying members for the unions. Second, the focus is shifted from actually gauging the quality of teachers, which results in low performing teachers retaining their positions and thus, remaining a member of the union. Teachers’ unions need to hold teachers accountable for job performance and as a result, should be a factor in salary decisions.

Some teachers are opposed to job performance being linked to salary because performance is often based on results of standardized testing. Standardized testing does not need to be the sole measure of a teachers’ performance in the classroom. In fact, teachers can be assured that other means are used by actively engaging their unions and by use of collective bargaining. Teachers can come up with performance standards in conjunction with school administrators and with the aid of teachers’ unions get these standards written into teacher contracts. Quality standards for teachers should be in place, but teachers can ensure fairness by cooperating with their unions and school administrators. Implementing fair job performance standards could help settle the salary debate in public education.

Salary is often determined by teacher tenure and seniority in most states and is an important part of the job performance standards debate. Public school teachers are granted tenure as a way to protect them from unjust firing and to provide due process
rights and job security. Tenure typically provides teachers a safeguard against administrators wanting to give jobs to their friends and other political reasons. Teachers gain tenure after a probationary period of two to five years, depending on the state and teacher contract. Teachers with higher seniority are also awarded higher salaries, which is associated with attaining tenure.

One difficulty with tenure is that it makes it almost impossible to fire a tenured teacher because of the multiple steps and administrative processes the teacher is entitled to. Those include filing charges, evaluations, hearings, and heavy union involvement. Some teachers support tenure because it gives them a sense of job security, but they also recognize that it allows bad teachers to retain their positions when the system is abused. Teachers’ unions support tenure because it provides another protection to teachers and gives them power over administrators and school boards. The unions are aware that there is an abuse of tenure and that it allows bad teachers to remain in the classroom, but they believe that the system should not be abolished. There should be a safeguard against unjust firing, but the system of tenure is ineffective. Teachers need to demand a new system of job performance evaluation that ensures quality teaching in schools.

Examining The Relationship Between Collective Bargaining And Teachers

Collective bargaining is often credited with providing public school teachers better salaries and benefits. However, it has been argued that, “teachers today are not

better off financially as a result of industrial-style collective bargaining.” This may be the result of the change in labor since the 1960s, when collective bargaining became legal for public sector employees, and today’s rising costs of belonging to a union. Teachers’ unions have been successful in netting teachers higher salaries through the collective bargaining process. But the effects of collective bargaining on schools have become increasingly negative. A positive school climate and higher teacher job satisfaction are two of the prerequisites for effective schools. These prerequisites have been undermined by collective bargaining because it often worsens relations among teachers, principals, school administrators, and school boards. Collective bargaining in the public education sector no longer provides teachers with the gains they saw in the 1960s and ‘70s.

However, collective bargaining is the foundation for the rise of teachers’ unions, which is a core factor as to why teachers join their unions. Collective bargaining is at the center of how schools operate on a day-to-day basis and has become instrumental in implementing education reforms in school. Teachers’ contracts are essentially iron clad due to the collective bargaining process. Teachers’ contracts may be hundreds of pages and their length, density, and contract provisions make it virtually impossible for school administrators to make any changes within their schools, which could potentially benefit students. Union leaders emphasize that “Many provisions in teacher contracts might

11 Ibid., 31.

sound ‘terrible’ unless understood by ‘the context that [they] came from.’” Teachers and unions have fought for the right to have control over their contracts. Collective bargaining has been instrumental in giving teachers a voice in contract negotiations, but now needs to open to the idea and opportunity for reform efforts in education.

Teachers’ Role In Education Reform

Education reform needs to be included in collective bargaining for the benefit of teachers, students and the public school system. Thus far, the collective bargaining process has fallen short in terms of meeting education reform goals. Leadership of both the AFT and the NEA have acknowledged that collective bargaining needs to be focused on educational goals in order for reform to be effective in public schools. Support for educational goals in schools sometimes contradicts the message that teachers’ unions have emphasized for years, but this means that even union leadership realizes that change is not going to be effective unless everyone participates. Albert Shanker, former president of the AFT, said in 1993, “We’re not going to change the way schools function without simultaneously changing the way unions function….” Although Shanker was not the current president of the AFT at the time of this speech, his words are still crucial to the education reform movement. Union leadership can see that it is important for change to occur in the way unions operate in order to change schools.

13 Fuller, Mitchell and Hartmann, “Collective Bargaining in Milwaukee Public Schools,” 118.

14 Ibid., 112.

15 Ibid. See also, “A Tribute to Al Shanker,” Pew Forum on Education Reform, special insert in Education Week, May 14, 1997 for full text of speech.
Teachers have a vital role in implementing change in both teachers’ unions and public schools. It is up to teachers to use their unions to bargain for effective changes in order to implement reform. It has been noted that “…bargaining has mostly been a means for teachers to attain goals that may coincide with, but often stand apart from, educational effectiveness.”  

Teachers must voice their need for change to school administrators and their union leadership. Consequently, both teachers and their unions must work collectively with administrators and school districts to bargain for effective educational reform in schools.

There is a lot of debate about just how much teachers’ unions should be involved in improving the education system. Teachers’ unions exist for the teachers and school professionals they represent; yet in reality, “The unions don’t exist to help kids or improve education, despite what marketing-savvy union leaders may claim. Many teachers’ union members dedicate their lives to helping children learn, but the unions’ responsibility is to protect employees, not children.”  

Given that teachers’ unions’ sole obligation is to the teachers and professional personnel they represent, it should then follow the demands of its membership for a better education system and that is a part of the unions’ responsibility. The unions respond to pressure put on them by their members, so if teachers want their unions to have a more active role in public school reform, then

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16 Ibid., 113.

17 Ibid., 81.
they need to use their membership in the unions as a bargaining tool to get their demands met.

Teachers’ unions, teachers, school administrators, and school boards are all instrumental in public school reform. Bargaining is a process that all groups are involved in, but a majority of the bargaining is generally carried out in secret. Unfortunately, “the public does not understand bargaining’s impact on academic outcomes. Secrecy and a general lack of information make bargaining seem peripheral to educational outcomes.”

The secrecy surrounding bargaining makes it difficult for parents and those people outside the inner circle of the education system to understand what exactly needs to be done in terms of education policy. Teachers must demand from their unions, that bargaining be focused around education reform with complete transparency. This is an important change in the way that teachers use and interact with their unions. If teachers demand change from their unions, the unions will be forced to make substantial changes or risk the loss of revenue from dues paying members. Teachers need to be an information resource for parents and students because if not “…the public’s main access to information about bargaining will continue to be potentially self-serving explanations of management and labor.” The need for teachers to take a more active role in their unions is more pressing than ever. There is a shift occurring in public education, which requires teachers to become more vocal in the public education debate.

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18 Ibid., 115.
19 Ibid.
Management (school administrators) and teachers’ unions will continue to disclose information that is self-serving if teachers do not take their role in their unions to the next level because “to the NEA and other change-resistant teachers’ unions, accountability and transparency are not worthy goals. They are nefarious plots to embarrass and shame bad teachers. Union leaders are generally unwilling to admit that not all teachers are great at what they do.”\(^{20}\) There are many teachers who do an extraordinary job educating America’s children and it is up to these teachers to convince their unions that everyone needs to be accountable for the state of public education. Every teacher should demand full disclosure at every level of the education system.

Teachers unionized to bargain for better salaries, job security and working conditions, but reform was also a large component in their unionization to allow them the freedom in order to do their best work. Bargaining led to teachers’ contracts in public schools across the country. Teachers’ contracts are now stopping some proposed school reforms, such as longer school days or a longer school year. Many teachers may actually agree that a longer school year or longer school days would be an asset to their students, but cannot agree to it because it goes against their contract. This is just one instance where teachers can use their unions to implement changes that they believe will improve public education.

At top of their agenda, unions have identified their own needs, which does not seem to include significant changes to the public education system in America. Teachers,

on the other hand, know what is needed in their classrooms and “unlike teachers unions, whose interests rest primarily with protecting jobs and benefits for their members, it is individual classroom teachers who have the best chance of putting the needs of students at the top of their agenda.”  

21 Teachers know what works best and what areas need improvement and with school reform at the top of their agendas, teachers’ unions would have no choice but to follow suit. Teachers’ unions are responsible for the needs of their members, and those needs should include public school reform.

Conclusion

Teachers are responsible to the students they teach, and their parents. Education reform most greatly affects those people that are at the forefront—teachers, students, and parents. Teachers have the power to inform parents and students of the necessary reforms needed for schools and “the simple truth is, if ordinary citizens are to win the necessary battles for education reform, it is necessary to treat teachers’ unions as powerful political operatives. Unfortunately, one of the reasons that teachers’ unions are so arrogant and destructive is that many of their members are in total denial about their abuse of power politics.”  

22 Teachers do not need to become “political” in order to take a more active role in their unions’ activities. For too long teachers have assumed that their unions have their best interests at the top of their agenda, as well as the interests of schools and students.

Teachers’ unions are not the only impediment to changing the public education

21 Ibid., 48.

22 Ibid., 26.
system. Teachers need to be more involved in how their unions operate and become more active members. The time has come for teachers to use their unions for more than just bargaining for salary increases, but for instituting a change in the current educational policy. Teachers must listen to the concerns of parents and students and force the teachers’ unions to take action. This requires teachers to regularly attend union meetings and to build relationships with school administrators and school boards outside of the boundaries established by the teachers’ unions. The unions will begin to lose their total control over schools and educational policy once teachers become more involved in the activities of their unions and the education reform process. Public education reform will not be successful unless all adults involved in the education system become more active in the decision-making process and take control of the schools.
Teachers’ unions in America have varied membership rates and different types of roles in local and state politics. Several regional teachers’ unions provide a telling example of the correlation between teachers’ unions role in politics and school reform. Examining the teachers’ unions in California and Michigan provides the background for local teachers’ unions rise to political power and their current place in the public school reform debate. Using these two states as case studies provides an insight into how teachers’ unions use their political influence because both states are in the top three states with charter schools, which teachers’ unions actively oppose. By examining the teachers’ unions in these two diverse states one can truly understand how teachers’ unions have become the political powerhouses they are today and what needs to be done to ensure that they do not hinder school reform in the future.

California: A Case Study Of A Politically Strong Teachers’ Union

California is estimated to be the most populous state in the United States, according to the Census Bureau and in 2009 was estimated to have almost 37 million residents.\(^1\) Studying the public school system in the most populous state in America provides a look at the impact of teachers’ unions with the largest number of students.

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“California has more students enrolled in Kindergarten [through] 12th grade than any other state in the country—over 6.3 million in more than one thousand local school districts.”² The large number of students enrolled in the public school system in California provides the local and state affiliates of the national teachers’ unions with the opportunity to have a large political voice because of the enormous size of the public school system in the state.

California has teachers’ unions affiliated with the national branches of both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). The California Teachers Association (CTA) is an affiliate of the NEA and with 325,000 members is the state’s largest professional employee organization.³ While the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) is the state affiliate of the AFT, representing over 120,000 education professionals.⁴ These two unions are responsible for the millions of students in the California public school system, as well as the teachers and education professionals that serve these students. California public schools have seen their share of budget problems, proficiency concerns and less than ideal working environments for teachers. A brief look at the history of the CTA and CFT will provide the basis for the political

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control these unions now have and how this control affects school reform efforts across the state.

California’s Teachers’ Unions: A Brief History

The California Teachers Association was established in 1863 as the California Educational Society and quickly went to work fighting for the rights of California’s teachers beginning with winning the right for free public schools for California children in 1866 and notably in 1921, securing teacher tenure and due process laws. Since its inception CTA has fought for the rights of teachers and students in California and “after a decade of school strikes and teacher organizing, California…educators at last won the right to bargain collectively in 1975 when the CTA-sponsored Educational Employment Relations Act, also known as the Rodda Act, was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown.” CTA’s support for this important piece of legislation was the driving force for the union’s actions in the future and how they would move forward in the quest for the rights of teachers throughout California. 1988 was an important year for CTA and the state of California with Proposition 98 on the ballot. Prop 98 was a state law that would designate about 40 percent the state’s general fund for schools and community colleges. Public school teachers, along with the CTA, were determined to see that Prop 98 passed into law. Then president, Ed Foglia, boasts that, “the passage of Prop 98 and all that went

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
into that fight made CTA a stronger union and one of the strongest unions in the nation.\textsuperscript{8} This monumental victory ensured that CTA members would be involved in the campaigning for many more pieces of legislation, none of which could be overshadowed by the historic victory of passing Prop 98.

The California Federation of Teachers, the other large teachers’ union in California, was founded in 1919 “to provide a labor union alternative to the California Teachers Association, which was then dominated by school administrators.”\textsuperscript{9} The CFT supported the first tenure law in 1921, as well as supported for the extension of constitutional rights to women teachers, who were often reprimanded for their choice of dress or their activities outside of the classroom. Throughout the 1950s-1970s the CFT navigated the political arena to afford California’s teachers with the benefits and working rights they have today. The CFT also supported the Educational Employment Relations Act, which granted California’s educators the right to collectively bargain. The CFT is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, a member of the AFL-CIO. As a member of the AFL-CIO, the CFT has always been viewed as a labor union skilled in navigating the legal and legislative system.\textsuperscript{10} The CFT was established as a true labor union and continues the labor tradition of protecting the working rights of its members through navigating the legal system.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
A Look At The Political Involvement Of California Teachers’ Unions

Given the large size of the public school system in California any legislation that affects schools automatically garners the attention of the CFT and CTA. Both unions claim responsibility for the large legislative gains that teachers and public schools have received since the early twentieth century. The CFT and CTA know that their public support for certain pieces of legislation on the ballot will lead their members to vote in their favor. California Teachers Association boasts of their political achievements by announcing on their website, “CTA won the passage of 20 of the 31 Propositions it has supported since 1978.”

Political lobbying is commonplace with the California unions and they have become quite effective at using their members to promote their political stance. The CFT, not to be outdone by CTA, regularly speaks about their deep involvement in legal proceedings dealing with teachers and their rights. It has even been asserted that, “over ninety percent of the court decisions setting forth teachers’ rights in the state of California have CFT’s name on them.”

Both California teachers’ unions are very vocal about their deep political involvement, which serves the purpose of establishing their high political status to their members and to indicate which candidates and pieces of legislation are in the best interest of teachers (according to union standards).

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11 California Teachers Association, “The History of CTA.”

12 California Federation of Teachers, “Why is there a CFT?”
California’s public education system has been in crisis for years as a result of budget shortfalls and legislation limiting the allocation of public education funds. California’s teachers’ unions have been adamantly opposed to the deep budget cuts facing the already struggling schools. Union leadership is concerned that the public school system in California is being destroyed through deep funding cuts and the poor performance of many school districts: “The union leaders’ fears are grounded in the fact the nation’s most populous state faces a nearly $21 billion shortfall over the next 18 months, a deficit that comes after years of making deep cuts in core state programs.”¹³ These fears are grounded in the severe budget cuts that the public education system has faced in previous years. The strong stance teachers’ unions have taken with regards to funding the public education system has provided a divide between legislators and teachers’ unions in California. Divisions between legislators and teachers’ unions have led to the unions taking a strong interest in which candidates are voted into office.

Teachers’ unions are very concerned with which candidates are going to be representing their members in state government, but also locally on the school boards. School boards have direct control over salary disputes and all things that directly affect a teacher’s everyday life. For this reason, unions campaign heavily for certain school board candidates and others must raise all campaign money themselves.

…union-endorsed candidates usually receive contributions not only from the local union, but ‘passed through’ money from the union’s state affiliate. For example, in 1996, the California Teachers Association funneled at least $235,000 through

its local affiliates into school board election campaigns throughout the state. That total does not include contributions to local party committees, local get-out-the-vote efforts, or joint PACs.\textsuperscript{14} 

It is telling that CTA would spend so much money on local school board elections, but it is a common practice. Unions participate heavily in school board campaigns and elections; sometimes their members do not even realize the large extent of their involvement. California teachers’ unions are known for spending money and investing a lot of time into campaign activities, including using school facilities and supplies for political purposes including copying campaign flyers to send home with students (this occurred in the 1993 California voucher campaign).\textsuperscript{15}

The teachers’ unions in California have continued many of the practices of their national unions. The structure of power in the unions follows a chain from the national union, to the state and finally the local unions. All levels of the union follow the same political strategies that are put forth on the national level. Bargaining for contracts is supposed to remain local, but the NEA provides assistance and state affiliates hold training for their locals. An untitled pamphlet put out by the CTA in 1996 listed various bargaining goals including: Increase the Association’s role in educational decision-making.\textsuperscript{16} The implication of this goal is that the state and local branch of the union does not differ from the goals of the national and that California’s unions clearly feel that they

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Brimelow, \textit{The Worm in the Apple}, 98.  

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 100.  

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 83.
need greater involvement in the public education process. Given the political activities of California’s teachers unions it is clear that this is just another example of what occurs with the national union. California has many failing school districts and no lobbying on the part of the teachers’ unions has made any substantial difference or implemented long lasting school reform to get students performing better.

Michigan: A Case Study Examining The Effects On Teachers’ Unions’ Effectiveness After A Loss Of Political Power

Another state with a strong teachers’ union presence is Michigan. Michigan is the birthplace of the NEA, as a labor union, and has a lot to offer in terms of union presence in the public schools. Michigan’s teachers’ unions appear to be losing their power in the state legislature and their control over the schools has diminished significantly. Michigan has affiliates of both national teachers’ unions, The Michigan Education Association (MEA, an NEA affiliate) and AFT Michigan (the state affiliate of the AFT). A look at the history of the Michigan teachers’ unions uncovers how the role of teachers’ unions are changing dramatically and what these changes mean for teachers and public schools.

The History Of The Formation Of Michigan Teachers’ Unions

The Michigan Education Association (MEA) was founded in 1852, which was five year before the NEA was organized, as the Michigan State Teachers Association. By 1921 membership had grown so large that it became necessary to establish a regional and district system. In 1926 it officially adopted the name MEA. In 1965 the Michigan

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legislature gave public employees the right to bargain with their employers, which gave the MEA and teachers their right to bargain with school officials. This gave the MEA an increase in membership and now the MEA is the largest single public employee union, with over 137,000 members, in the state and the third largest education association in the United States.  

AFT Michigan is the other teachers’ union in Michigan and is affiliated with the national teachers’ union the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). AFT Michigan is significantly smaller than the MEA, with about 35,000 members. AFT Michigan was established in 1935 and has been politically involved since its inception; in 1937 they successfully fought for a teacher tenure law. Once collective bargaining became legal in Michigan in 1965, AFT Michigan pushed for teacher contracts to protect the working rights of teachers. AFT Michigan bargains and defends contracts, is very active politically and legislatively, and is involved in education issues.

The Rise And Fall Of Michigan Teachers’ Unions’ Political Power

The 1960s and ‘70s was an important time for education reform in Michigan because of legislation making it legal for public sector employees to collectively bargain. Michigan teachers’ unions won gains in salaries, benefits, and job security, but these gains were often attained through teacher strikes: “Between 1967 and 1980 there were

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20 Ibid.
454 teachers’ strikes against public school districts in Michigan, an average of almost 35 a year.”21 Strike tactics made teachers and their unions formidable opponents because schools are a public service and disruptions needed to be a minimum at all costs. Teachers’ unions used this to their advantage; the threat of a strike forced many school administrators and school boards to heed the demands from the teachers’ unions. Teachers’ salaries rose steadily in the 1980s, as the threat of strike lessened significantly.

The MEA began to establish themselves as a strong political force, especially within the Democratic Party. “…The MEA was reported to have provided more than $1.4 million in political contributions in 1992 to candidates and causes, including more than $900,000 for Democratic candidates for the Michigan House of Representatives.”22 Everything changed in 1990, however, when John Engler won the gubernatorial election. Engler upset his opponent who was supported by the teachers’ unions and has always maintained a tough stance against teachers’ unions in Michigan and made it a political goal to diminish the power the teachers’ unions had within legislature.

There has been a large struggle between Governor Engler and teachers’ unions, specifically the MEA, in Michigan. The political climate in Michigan has changed and as a result the MEA has suffered some major political losses. Meanwhile Engler “and his allies have successfully demonized the MEA as one of the principal obstacles to

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22 Ibid.
education reform in Michigan, and the union’s political influence has been significantly diminished. Teachers have lost their right to strike, and with it much of their leverage in negotiations with local school boards.”23 Removing teachers’ unions’ most powerful tool in achieving their demands, the ability to strike, Michigan government has slowly taken political power away from teachers’ unions and made them the enemy of public education. The battle between the MEA and Governor Engler brought to the surface some of the issues plaguing the Michigan Public Education system, most notably the debate between radical school reforms and the maintaining of the status quo. The MEA found itself increasingly politically isolated for their insistence of maintaining the status quo. Engler made it apparent that maintaining the status quo would no longer be an acceptable practice in the Michigan legislature or for public schools.24

Governor Engler declared war on teachers’ unions in Michigan and vowed to take back the schools and affirmed that, “the power and control the teachers unions have had over education policies in Michigan ended….”25 To achieve this Engler had to develop a distinction between teachers’ unions and their members in order to avoid the union’s charge that opposition to teachers’ unions is opposition to teachers.

The struggle between the leadership of the Michigan Education Association and Governor Engler is clearly not a battle about education, but a battle about power…We must separate the union from the union members in our thinking about educational issues. Individual teachers are concerned with educational


24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 179.
quality…The leadership of the Michigan Education Association is, and should be, concerned with promoting the political and economic power of the union.26

The power struggle between government and teachers’ unions has presented a clear example of how much political influence teachers’ unions have and how they use politics not to the advantage of teachers, but for the unions. Governor Engler has made a distinction between the teaching profession and teachers’ unions as labor unions. Michigan teachers’ unions have lost significant power due to the decline of the Democratic Party in the state and their lack of participation in the educational policy debates, led by Governor Engler.

The unions’ loss of power has meant new uncertainties for the status of teachers and the future of school reform and “the question that remains is whether the political destruction of teachers unions is likely to lead to improved education for Michigan school children.”27 The confrontation between Governor Engler and the Michigan teachers’ unions has demonstrated where the fight between state government and teachers’ unions is headed. The severely diminished political power of the Michigan teachers’ unions has shown, in this case, that the unions were hindering public school reform.

Conclusion

Examining the teachers’ unions in California and Michigan and the difficulties present between state legislators and union leaders has provided an insight to how school


27 Ibid., 185.
reform can move forward in the future. The state of public education in California and Michigan has diminished, but each state has used different tactics to implement change. California teachers’ unions have retained much of their political power and continue to use this power to maintain their control over public schools in the state. Meanwhile, Michigan teachers’ unions have lost virtually all of their political power and it remains to be seen whether the government takeover will fair any better in improving the public education system. Looking at both states it is clear that the teachers’ unions that have presented an impediment to real public school reform.
Public education, in America, is currently under extreme scrutiny for its failure to adequately educate students and prepare them for life once they leave the education system. Not only are their counterparts in other industrialized countries outperforming American students, but they are also falling behind where students were a generation before them. On both the federal and state level, reform efforts are being pushed in order to improve the dire state of the American public school system.

The status of public education and public schools has always been a subject of debate politically and socially. Teachers’ unions, teachers, schools, politicians, school boards, and parents have all been blamed for American children falling behind and not achieving academically. The federal government is not directly responsible for the direction of each school or each school district, as that falls to the state governments—“it is states and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation.”\(^1\) The federal government does have some responsibility, which is largely through legislation and this is accomplished primarily through the U.S. Department of Education.

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The Federal Government And Public Education

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) was established in 1980 by combining several government departments. The Department of Education Organization Act (Public Law 96-88, October 1979) allowed the formation of the ED. The ED’s mission statement includes:

[To] Strengthen the Federal commitment to assuring access to equal educational opportunity for every individual; Supplement and complement the efforts of states, the local school systems and other instrumentalities of the states, the private sector, public and private nonprofit educational research institutions, community-based organizations, parents, and students to improve the quality of education; Increase the accountability of Federal education programs to the President, the Congress, and the public.²

Current school reform efforts are focused on the issue of quality, which is something that is addressed by the U.S. Department of Education’s mission. The importance of the ED is that it provides the federal support to state control over schools and education; by placing accountability on federal government sectors to not only state government, but also the public, puts the ED at the forefront of everything that affects the public education system in America.

The federal government is responsible for upholding the democratic values that America was founded on. Over time quality public education has become a right for each and every American child (up to a certain age). Given that public school teaching is a public sector job, there are certain levels of transparency that are expected by the American public. In order for any lasting reform efforts to actually succeed the American public.

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public needs to have an input, whether through voting or other democratic processes. The power the public should have over school reform efforts is virtually implicit considering that America prides itself on being a true democracy therefore, “…school reform without public oversight or review is contrary to basic democratic principles. In a democracy, every public agency is subject to scrutiny.” The federal government is responsible for operating under democratic principles, which includes public involvement in the public education system.

The federal government also has some financial responsibility for public education, but this falls mostly on state governments and “the structure of education finance in America reflects this predominant State and local role…This is especially true at the elementary and secondary level, where about 89.5 percent of the funds will come from non-Federal sources.” The federal government has devoted the ED to improving the quality of public education, but with less financial responsibility their role is limited as to how effective they can be as far as implementing new programs. With approximately 10 percent of the funding for public elementary and high schools coming from the federal government there is a huge opportunity for private funding and influence in American public education.

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The Current Status Of Public Education

The education system is one of the most important institutions in America because it is what sustains the country and prepares the next generation to be productive members of society. Due to its immeasurable importance, the public education system is often under intense scrutiny for its performance. Currently it appears as though, “our society and its education institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.”

The basic purpose of schooling is to prepare children for adulthood and to contribute to society. Parents entrust their children to the schools to receive a quality education. Socially, the expectations of the public education system appear to be questioned as more parents have expressed dissatisfaction with their children’s education. “And the fact remains that for about one out of four children, America’s government school system is completely failing to function as advertised.” Americans should be ashamed that this statistic even exists. Disheartening facts, such as this, leave the public education system open to critique from all Americans as well as globally.

The public education system is under stress from the adults that it employs and the adults who control its activities. Essentially, Americans of every age are impacted by the public education system and even those people who do not have children were most likely once enrolled in a public school. “Public education in America has become so

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5 Paige, The War Against Hope, 17.

6 Brimelow, The Worm in the Apple, 21.
consumed with meeting the frequent demands of employees and other adult constituencies that the needs of the customers—parents and children—often are an afterthought. 7 If public education were examined through an economic lens then it would be up to the consumers (parents and students) to express dissatisfaction with the producers (schools-including teachers, school administrators and government). The public education system is no longer meeting the needs of parents or students, which is partly to blame on the focus of the education system. More students and their parents need to place pressure on teachers, school administrators and their local government to get the focus of school reform shifted to the students and providing a quality education.

School boards, teachers’ unions, state and local government largely control the current system of public education. Students, who are no longer content with receiving a mediocre education, are now leading some of the current school reform efforts. Students, along with teachers, are the greatest resource in determining what needs improvement in public schools because they are in them everyday and can see where education efforts are lagging. Students understand that there is a lack of qualified teachers in their schools or that school funding prevents students from having the opportunity of enrolling in advanced classes. For example, in Los Angeles, California students have voiced concerns over their Mayor’s plans for reforming their public schools without their input. A seventh grader feared that he has suffered at his middle school because of a lack of teachers in

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math and science. Students have a vested interest in seeing an improvement in the public education system and as reform efforts are being pushed this group should be placed in the conversation about which direction school reforms should take.

As the United States continues to compete in the global market it is necessary to educate students in preparation to become future leaders, thus making public education reform so important. “America’s schools simply must improve, or else every hope we have of sustaining our great democracy and our vibrant economy is lost.” A high school diploma and other advanced degrees are necessary to gain employment in most industries. Many American students are not given the chance to contribute to society because they are not able to find work due to a lack of education. As the quality of education continues to be questioned, it is important for Americans to address this serious problem and determine lasting solutions to completely transform the way the public school system operates.

Political Approaches To Education Including Current School Reform Efforts

Politics play a substantial role in the operation of public agencies in the United States, and public education is no exception. From the federal to state and local governments, school boards and superintendents are all elected positions. Public schools are in a unique position, due to the elected positions that control the administration and

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9 Ibid., 11.
policy in schools. Schools are used as political tools, or bargaining points, in exchange for other demands and this leads to an abuse of power by many people involved in the education system, which only hurts students and teachers. “‘Take the schools out of politics!’ In the early twentieth century, that was the call to battle of advocates of a new concept of democracy in public education.”

The politics involved with public school leadership has made it difficult to institute uniform reform efforts.

Given the limited control the federal government has over public schools, problems arise when school reform efforts are issued for the entire country. Each state has different school regulations and curriculum requirements. Reform efforts by the federal government are not always well received or easy to incorporate throughout each state and individual school district. Each U.S. President has their own education policy, but it is the more radical ones that cause the most discussion about what needs to be done in public education. George W. Bush’s administration came under praise as well as severe criticism for his education policy: “There is a clear ‘theory of action’ underlying the Bush administration’s education policy agenda, and it is this: accountability, transparency and choice are the keys to excellence in American Education.”

The elements involved in the Bush administration’s educational policy are very controversial because the public education system is not very transparent with disclosing information to the public. Choice, specifically school choice, is a point of contention for teachers and

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11 Ibid., 14.
especially teachers’ unions because this takes away the political power over schools and puts power in the hands of parents and students.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is the most notable and controversial element of the Bush administration’s education policy. NCLB was designed at the federal level to hold each school, teacher and student accountable for meeting certain improvement standards (adequate yearly progress) or face loss of federal funding or a possible shut down of underperforming schools. NCLB completely changed the way the federal government interacted with the public schools in the country. The No Child Left Behind Act relies heavily on the results of standardized tests to measure school improvement, which has received mixed reactions from teachers, teachers’ unions, those involved with educational policy and school administrators. “…Schools would also be obliged to pay for tutoring by private companies or to facilitate the transfer of their students, if the parents so requested, to a better school that boasted higher scores.”\(^{12}\) In a time when schools were in dire need of improvement, NCLB provided a new approach to an old problem. The implementation of this law in 2002 (it was approved in 2001) seemed to usher public school reform into a new era and to turn the old system around.

Public school reform today is centered on several core ideas, one of them being choice. “The right of transfer” provision in NCLB seems to give parents the right to have their children transferred to a better performing school. While this system of transfer is complicated and often leads to children remaining in their underperforming schools, it

did bring the issue of school choice into the discussion of public school reform efforts. School choice suggests two opportunities for parents: the first provides parents with the opportunity to enroll their child in a better performing school, some alternatives being private schools, when the school their child attends receives a failing grade or fails to make adequate yearly progress; the second alternative is for a parent to send their child to a charter school. A charter school is an independently run school, which sets its own academic standards, the length of the school day and year are typically longer, and the teachers are not usually unionized. These two options of school choice have had mixed success, but they do provide parents with the opportunity to give their children an alternative and a chance for academic success.

Teachers’ Unions And School Reform Efforts

Teachers’ unions are deeply intertwined in the public education system and reform efforts impact the unions, their members and the schools they are involved with. However, “teacher unions constitute a major part of the education system. No reform effort can be successful if it ignores reform in labor laws.” School reform efforts must take into account the power that teachers’ unions hold within the public education system and the two must work together in order to successfully implement change that benefits the students who are suffering in a broken school system. There are “many parents and educators who are increasingly convinced that teacher unions and their questionable

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tactics share a large part of the blame for the shabby condition of our public school system.…"\textsuperscript{15} It is this image of teachers’ unions that constantly puts the blame on the unions for the condition of public schools. The relationship between teachers’ unions and public school reform is usually one of opposition.

The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), their leadership and their policies are often blamed for blocking school reform efforts. As teachers’ unions have continued to grow in size and power, the public school system has deteriorated and students are underperforming. If “you plot the growth of the NEA and the dropping of SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] scores… they’re inversely proportional. The problems are unions in the schools. The problem is bureaucracy.”\textsuperscript{16} The correlation between teachers’ unions and the state of public schools needs further research to definitively state that teachers’ unions are negatively affecting academic achievement. It has been demonstrated, however, that teachers’ unions are actively blocking school reforms that have the potential to improve the state of public education.

Reform efforts that put the power of teachers’ unions at risk are actively opposed, regardless of whether they will benefit students. Teachers’ unions’ main priority is for themselves and the members they represent. Charter schools are a major source of contention for the unions because they threaten to take away teachers and offer no

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 15.
opportunities for union power holds: “In particular, they said, charter schools would not be beholden to teachers’ unions and work rules that sometimes lessened the available time for teaching.”\(^{17}\) This attitude towards charter schools has pitted union leadership against progressives for public school reform. When, in 2002, a philanthropist offered the city of Detroit $200 million to establish 15 charter schools the teachers’ unions were opposed to this even though new schools would benefit students in failing schools. In fact, “opposition to reform has even driven union bosses to reject hundreds of millions of dollars for public education—when those dollars pay for kids in non-unionized charter schools.”\(^{18}\) Using tactics, such as walkouts, teachers’ unions protest proposed school reforms and present themselves as a large obstacle to education reform efforts.

Teachers’ unions have sent a mixed message regarding charter schools, which leads to confusion about what the motives are behind their opposition to implementing charter schools. The NEA experimented with charter schools in 1995, as an attempt to create model charter schools (with unionized teachers, of course) and to research the effectiveness of these types of schools.\(^{19}\) Albert Shanker, former president of the AFT, initially pushed for charter schools as a way of giving teachers more freedom and


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 185-193.
leadership in schools in 1988.\textsuperscript{20} As the charter school movement progressed, Shanker completely disagreed with the way that charter schools operated independently from school districts and unions. Yet, Shanker is still credited with giving his approval to charter schools making it difficult to sort out where exactly teachers’ unions stand on the issue of charter schools. This back and forth on charter schools emphasizes that teachers’ unions are not always forthcoming with information and that public school reform needs a uniform policy from teachers’ unions.

A major obstacle to school reform efforts is the ironclad teachers’ contracts. Teachers’ unions have fought many battles to ensure teachers’ rights through contracts, but it is virtually impossible to change the way public schools operate because of these contracts.

Unfortunately, the major obstacles standing in the way of reform, and the teachers’ unions’ main weapon, are teachers’ union contracts. It would be one thing if these contracts provided basic employee rights and protections; but, over the years these contracts have institutionalized teacher control to the point where even the most brazen and daring reformers…cannot get very far.\textsuperscript{21}

The first step to collaboration between school reformers and teachers’ unions is to negotiate new contracts or allow for changes to be implemented, even if they affect things that are included in teacher contracts. Many teachers may not realize all of the things that are controlled by their contracts and it will take cooperation of the teachers, their unions, and school boards to institute school reforms.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 85.
Teachers’ unions are often blamed for the failure of public school reform efforts because they are often characterized as being closed off and their control over information and data regarding school performance. In reality, union leadership is aware of how they are perceived by the public and that by protecting their members it can give the appearance that they have a blatant disregard for students. Bob Chase (then-President of the NEA) addressed the teachers’ unions’ failure to be more involved in public school reform efforts. Chase admitted as follows:

The fact is, in city after city across the country, public school systems are grossly mismanaged and are abjectly failing in their education mission. The fact is that teacher unions…have not done enough to protest these failures. We do a great job of protecting our members from these dysfunctional school systems. But we can and must do more to protect children who are the real victims of these systems.22

Recognizing that teachers’ unions do share a large responsibility in taking an active role in public school reform efforts was almost unheard of at the time. Union leadership needs to examine the way their unions function and how they can adapt that in order to take a more active role in public education reform. Teachers’ unions and their leadership still pose the greatest obstacle to education reform efforts today, but it remains to be seen as to how they will factor into future reforms and if their power over schools remains at the level it is at currently.

Conclusion

Public school reform efforts have taken various approaches to change the way public schools operate, which includes changing school leadership. Some school districts

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22 Gross, *The Conspiracy of Ignorance*, 211.
have experimented with bringing in superintendents and school board members from outside of the education system to provide a new outlook and approach to school reform:

These outsider school leaders often are brought in specifically because they have no allegiance to any of the internal forces within the public education framework. Often they begin their jobs with what they think is a mandate and a blank slate, only to discover later that the special interests are so entrenched in the form of labor contracts, legal precedents, and other agreements that there really is no such thing as a blank slate in public education reform.\textsuperscript{23}

Public education reform needs to be able to have the freedom to restructure the way schools are operating because the current system is no longer acceptable. Bringing in leadership with no ties to teachers’ unions is one way to ensure that all aspects of the issue are considered. Outside leadership must work with union leadership in order to come to an agreement on an approach to public school reform that will be most beneficial to the students.

The future of public school reform will require all levels of government (federal, state and local), teachers’ unions, school administrators, teachers, parents and students to collaborate and take a strong stance when it comes to improving the education system. Education achievement needs to be the top item on the agenda and blame needs to be placed on each party involved. The federal government needs to continue the work with the ED and advise states on education policy while giving incentives for schools that are showing educational improvement. State and local government needs to take some of the political power away from teachers’ unions and work in collaboration with union leadership on improving the public school system. The future of our country depends

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 9.
upon educating students adequately. Public schools need to be completely overhauled if America’s children stand any chance of acquiring *quality* education.
A LOOK TO THE FUTURE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS’ UNIONS AND PUBLIC SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS

The public education system in America is in crisis. American children are failing to receive a quality education or the preparation for them to succeed once they are outside of the school system. Many public schools are under poor leadership and teachers are struggling to educate students while complying with federal and state mandates for academic achievement. The politics surrounding educational policy can hinder the implementation of effective school reform because schools are looked at as tools or pawns to be used in bargaining, rather than as the collective goal of all parties involved.

The largest obstacle to public school reform appears to be teachers’ unions, their political control of education policy, and their refusal to give up political power for the sake of bettering the educational lives of American students. The two national teachers’ unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), have been extremely successful at mobilizing teachers (and other education personnel) and promoting better working conditions in American public schools. Over time, the NEA and the AFT changed their focus to not only include teachers’ interests, but also promoting their own political agendas as well. In every state across America, teachers’ unions are deeply involved in the political sphere. It is this
political involvement that has made teachers’ unions the fierce opponents of school administrators and those involved with education reform.

The political agendas of the NEA and the AFT have moved beyond the scope of benefits and better working conditions for teachers to causes that are not related to education or teachers. For example, both the NEA and the AFT have lent financial support to ballot initiatives supporting raising the minimum wage in various states.¹ A raise in minimum wage could potentially impact teachers. However, using members’ forced dues to pay for supporting legislation that does not directly have an impact on them is against the purpose of belonging to a union. Using money, support staff, time, and resources to support legislation and organizations not directly involved with the education system is irresponsible. Teachers’ unions have moved from an era of promoting social causes associated with education to an era of promoting anything that will give them more political clout.

The questionable tactics and activities of teachers’ unions have made them the enemy of the public education system. Teachers’ unions have done a lot to restore the prestige of the teaching profession and to guarantee many working rights for teachers. The efforts put forth by teachers’ unions beginning with collective bargaining and teacher contracts have been overshadowed by corruption scandals, political agendas, and a lack of promoting members’ interests. Teachers’ unions have been involved with corruption

and embezzlement scandals in states all across the country, which casts suspicion on whether teachers’ unions can even be a vital part of education reform.\(^2\)

The ways in which teachers’ unions form partnerships with corporations, specifically insurance companies and retirement plans, has illustrated how teachers’ unions use public schools as a tool to gain more financial and political power. The NEA’s exclusive use of Prudential Insurance services in Fairfax County, Virginia sparked controversy because it was alleged that the Prudential Foundation has made financial donations to the NEA.\(^3\) This was not an isolated incident questioning the partnerships with insurance companies because the NEA has been involved with the Horace Mann Educators Corporation, which is a property/casualty and life insurer. Horace Mann has ties to Prudential Insurance, which has ties to the NEA. Having these relationships with insurance companies often does a disservice to union members who are forced to take the coverage offered or risk not being covered, even if that means the tax payers are forced to pay for higher insurance costs. It is this disregard for members’ interests that discredits teachers’ unions.

The deep political involvement of both national teachers’ unions characterizes their current state and also emphasizes what an important role they play in instituting educational reforms. Public school reform will not be possible in the future without the

\(^2\) Some of the more notable teachers’ union scandals have occurred in Florida and the District of Columbia, with union leadership embezzling millions of dollars from the unions for personal use, which are taken from the dues that union members are forced to pay.

cooperation of teachers’ unions or stripping unions of their political strongholds, especially within the Democratic Party. The AFT and the NEA spend millions of dollars each year on political activities, which largely benefit Democratic Party candidates and causes. With political and monetary support comes certain privileges; in the case of teachers’ unions they get candidates into office and are rewarded with the guarantee of support. Even local union affiliates mobilize when it is time for elections by distributing materials, offering volunteers, and donating money to campaigns. If the teachers’ unions were interested in solely electing the candidates that have the best interests of public education on their platform, then it would follow that there would be a more balanced giving between the Democratic and Republican Parties. Teachers’ unions’ political support is not representative of its members’ political affiliations and yet, they claim to be non-partisan. Teachers’ unions support the candidates that will ensure they maintain their political strongholds. This system needs to be modified if there is any real chance at public education reform. Teachers’ unions liberal use of the political system to their advantage needs to be stopped in order to ensure that school reformers get the freedom to make radical changes that are so desperately needed in public schools.

Learning From Case Studies In California And Michigan

The examination of the teachers’ unions in California and Michigan has presented two sides to the future of America’s teachers’ unions and their involvement in public schools. Both states have a rich tradition of strong union membership and influence in their public schools, but their histories provide telling examples of where the public
school system is headed in the future. California demonstrates the future of public education with a teachers’ union that is the largest and most politically powerful union in the state. While, Michigan teachers’ unions have seen their political power dwindled down to virtually nothing and the state government has taken over the public schools.

California has the largest public school system in the country, which makes the California Teachers’ Association (CTA) the largest labor union in the state. Given its enormous size, the CTA is very powerful, politically. CTA has the ability to mobilize teachers for voting drives and give large campaign donations. California’s teachers’ unions have gained tremendous political power and have been very successful in defeating propositions that go against their interests. California is representative of the direction that public school reform will take if teachers’ unions continue to increase their political power. Many education reform efforts have been halted in California due to a lack of support from the state’s teachers’ unions.

California teachers’ unions have also been successful at getting “union-friendly” candidates voted into office. In one year the CTA gave “at least $235,000 through its local affiliates into school board election campaigns throughout the state.” This is just one example of how California’s teachers’ unions are capable of using their large membership numbers to ensure that their political interests are preserved. The teachers’ unions in California have such a deep involvement in elections and policy decisions that they are often hard to defeat.

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California is an example of how difficult it is to implement public school reform without the endorsement and cooperation of teachers’ unions. Examining these unions and their political clout, public school reformers must figure out a way to reduce the unions’ power or get their involvement in school reform efforts. Public school reform will be impossible in California without stripping the unions of their political strongholds on schools. California teachers must also start demanding that their unions represent their interests, as well as those of their students. Teachers have an important role in public school reform in California, given the power of their unions. Unions will not be able to exist without their dues paying members, so teachers can mobilize and restructure their unions.

Michigan’s teachers’ unions represent what happens when state government takes their political power away. Michigan’s teachers’ unions used to be very powerful and had a complete hold on the public schools and education policy. However, Michigan teachers’ unions have lost much of their political power, which stems from them not being able to get their candidates elected. Without elected officials that are basically under union control, for fear of loss of campaign funds or endorsement, the unions lose the ability to control the legislation affecting public schools. Without political power, unions are very limited in their involvement in public education decisions.

Teachers’ unions in Michigan are no longer consulted on educational reforms. The governor of Michigan erased the validity of the claim made by teachers’ unions, that attacks on teachers’ unions are attacks on teachers and this greatly weakened the union’s
ability to discredit government officials. Teachers can now freely be involved in reform talks without their unions’ control. The loss of political power for Michigan teachers’ unions has been devastating and is ushering in a new era of political leadership that is not under union control.

Public school reform, in Michigan, is now under the control of the state government without union involvement. Michigan provides an opportunity for teachers to be more involved in which reform efforts they believe will work in their schools. The future of teachers’ unions in Michigan looks bleak. Without political power, the teachers’ unions have very little leverage with which to persuade their members that they are the only way their interests can be guaranteed. It is still unknown whether public schools will improve under government control, but it should shed light on whether the teachers’ unions were hindering reform efforts or not.

Examining the effects of teacher union leadership in individual states is a good indication for how to proceed with school reform in the future. If school reform efforts are successful in states, such as Michigan, with politically weakened teachers’ unions then educational reformers can push reform efforts that had previously been halted by union involvement. Monitoring whether reform efforts are successful by a lack of union involvement then the question of whether teachers’ unions hurt schools might have a more definitive answer.
The Future Of Public School Reform

Public school reform is at the center of many political debates today and the future of public schools depends on these reform efforts. Many different alternatives have been suggested in improving the public education system, including school choice, charter schools, and merit pay for teachers. None of these reform efforts have proven to be enough to transform the public education system in America, but the positive gains they have received suggests that they can work. Public education reformers need to explore which reforms work best for different types of school districts in different areas.

Federal school reform efforts have not been as successful as anticipated largely because they were implemented on a national scale. Each school, district, county, and state is unique and the needs of their students are not uniform. Certain reform efforts will work better in other geographical areas than others and in order to reform the public school system it is important to take into account these differences. The federal government has begun to implement new programs as incentives for states to receive more funding for their public schools, but these reform efforts need to account for the differences in schools and students. The Race to the Top Fund is one such federal program that targets four areas of reform in schools. Using more criteria than just standardized tests allows for schools to develop systems that track students’ improvement and gives room for school reforms that will not be uniform in each state.\(^5\)

State governments will largely control public school reform efforts because they are responsible for their schools. Education reformers need to work aggressively with state governors and legislators in testing reforms and figuring out which methods will work for that state. Public education reform needs to be a top priority for each state and maintaining the status quo is no longer an option. State government needs to take a more active role in public school reform efforts, even if that means funding more research to determine what will actually work.

Teachers will also have a huge role in reforming the public school system. Teachers need to be able to speak freely, without fear of retaliation from the teachers’ unions, about what is really going on in their classrooms. Teachers need to be vocal about teachers that are not performing their duties and about which programs are not working for their students. Without the active participation of teachers, education reform efforts might not adequately address the problems that students are having in their schools and classrooms. The future of public school reform needs to include input from teachers.

If teachers’ unions are going to be involved with public school reform then teachers need to demand more from their unions. Teachers should dictate which candidates are concerned with their best interests or whose ideas are most in alignment with where public education needs to go. The unions need to become actual representative groups instead of masquerading as one, when in fact, the top leadership is calling the shots. Teachers’ unions need to accept that their political influence will most likely be diminished in order to have effective schools. Teachers’ unions face losing their
strong hold in schools if they continue to refuse to forfeit any of their political influence, for the sake of education reform.

Likewise, public school reform efforts in the future need the involvement of parents. Parents simply cannot blame “the system” for failing to educate their children. Without the active involvement of parents, students will continue to fall behind. Even with the many ideas that are being suggested to reform the public education system, one thing is still lacking and that is parental involvement. Many students that are enrolled in underperforming schools are still succeeding and a lot of that has to do with parental involvement. Parents need to demand that the schools be reformed and take an active role in this process. One role is voting the right candidate(s) into office; candidates that support school reform and who are willing to listen to the very voters that put them in office. Getting the right candidates into key government positions is a critical part of the school reform movement.

The final, and perhaps most important, element of public school reform is the students. Students understand when their school is not serving their educational needs. The students in schools right now will be the future leaders of the country and their education matters. Students need to be allowed a voice in school reform efforts because they will provide valuable insight into the public education system. Including students in the conversation about reform efforts is important because they continue these efforts in the future. The future rests in their hands and they should have a say in what happens to their schools. Every reform effort needs to be constructed with the students’ best interests
as the number one priority. This mindset may require changes at every level of the reform effort, but students have been ignored for so long that now is the time for their voices to be heard.

Students need to demand the changes they so desperately need in their schools. Adults need to erase the idea that children do not want more aggressive academic programs or that they could not provide realistic solutions to education reform. Students and adults need to work together to put together ideas for revitalizing public schools.

We need to mobilize as a country for the purpose of implementing the huge changes necessary for reforming the public education system. The future of the public education system rests with the reform efforts that have already begun. In some cases it might be necessary to start from the ground up and instead of trying to fix schools that are not working we need to just start over. The mentality of those involved in education reform needs to be drastically altered. The biggest hurdle to change appears to be the teachers’ unions, but even they are making progress to working with government groups to address the problems facing public schools. The presidents of the NEA and the AFT, in collaboration with the U.S. Secretary of Education have announced a national education reform conference on labor-management collaboration. The significance of this conference is monumental because it could provide the opportunity for school administrators, teachers’ unions, and teachers to begin work on reform efforts on the

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local level. It promotes collaboration between the groups instead of pitting one against the other. This reflects hope for the future of school reform efforts and the cooperation of all groups involved focused on improving education for all students instead of their own self-interests.

Conclusion

The decline of academic achievement in public schools appears to have a direct correlation with the rise of political power of the two national teachers’ unions. After examining the rich history of teachers’ unions and their motivation behind the mobilization of teachers in the Twentieth Century there is hope that the leadership can shift the focus back to improving the quality of education. The public school system can only be reformed if all parties take the lessons learned from school reform history and unite for a common cause. Teachers’ unions need to work with the government, school officials, and school boards that they have historically viewed as opponents. Teachers’ unions have long held schools hostage as a way of getting their demands met, but the time has come for this power to be removed.

In order for America to progress, public education needs to improve immediately and it will take a sense of urgency from all those involved to accomplish this task. “Education is the most eminently human of all pursuits, and it requires human excellence, achievement, and mutual respect to ensure knowledge, culture, and civilization are
imparted to the next generation.” Public school reform will be successful because America will stay true to the democratic values the country was founded upon.

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7 Paige, *The War Against Hope*, 164.
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