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More Lessons from a Teachers' Union

Last month we learned from the teachers' union in the North Hills school district how to use state-granted power to strike during a school year to bully contract negotiators into compliance with your wishes. Now the Penn-Trafford teachers are offering yet another lesson.

The union is demanding to have teacher pay raised to a level in line with the top districts in Westmoreland County. They boast that despite what they claim is low pay, students in Penn-Trafford schools continued to be high performers. They go on to claim that if they were to receive higher compensation, student performance will be even better. What a revelation! Since there is no empirical evidence that increasing pay leads to better student achievement, assigning any credence to this claim depends entirely on the believability of the union.

But, if the claim is accepted, the union must be confronted with an obvious question. Have teachers in this school district been slacking off and not doing their best for the kids in the past? If none of them are slackers, then the only way higher pay could lead to better student performance would be to allow the district to fire poor teachers and bring in top notch instructors.

Before any further negotiations take place the school district should ask the union whether it actually meant to say that higher pay would lead to better student performance. If they stick to their claim, the school board should ask the union for a list of the teachers who need to be replaced for failing to do their best as well as those who are simply incapable of doing a superior job.

The other thing we learn from the union's claim is that logical consistency is not a necessary criterion for union arguments. For years, teachers have railed against tying pay to performance. Merit pay for teachers is simply anathema to their union. Now, in a complete contradiction, they say more pay will lead to better performance. Why not reward superior teachers with more pay now? Simple: it would be divisive and undermine union solidarity, the one thing that can never be allowed to happen.

Penn-Trafford teachers were on strike for 12 days last fall and the school board refused to meet their demands. To make up for the 12 days, the Christmas break was eliminated,

undoubtedly causing great consternation to parents and students. In retrospect this has to be one of the poorest decisions the board has ever made. Now they are looking at another strike before the school year is out. Under Pennsylvania law, teachers are allowed to strike twice in a school year. The union has enough school days in hand for a strike while still meeting the requirement of getting in 180 days in before June 30.

After the latest round of negotiations failed to produce a settlement, the union is threatening to walk out again. Perhaps the district will hold firm and not yield. The teachers' union estimates that the second walkout could last up to 18 days.

If there is another strike it will be unpleasant for parents and students. Working parents will be faced with the prospect of finding alternative care for their children during the strike. For many the choice will be between staying home and losing income or paying for day care at the cost of possibly hundreds of dollars depending on the number and ages of the children. If the school year drags on to the legally mandated end, June 30th, many parents will be faced with conflicts over their family's summer plans.

Clearly, teacher strikes can cause widespread disruption and create serious rifts in the community. Thus, it is time for the Legislature to enact a law that will put an end to these stoppages. Ending the right to strike and removing some of the enormous difficulty school boards encounter when trying to get rid of inadequate teachers could create an environment that will strengthen the education process and help contain cost.

Currently, only nine states permit strikes. Among those, Pennsylvania perennially ranks as one of the highest in the number of strikes. This is one high ranking Pennsylvania would be far better off not to have. One can only guess at the damage done to the state's ability to attract new businesses as a result of the union power and control over state policies that teacher strikes so unmistakably demonstrate.

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