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Fixing D.C.'s Schools

By Jeff Chu

How a 38-Year-Old Rookie Superintendent is Both a Wrecking Ball and an Architect

Paul Laurence Dunbar Senior High School in Washington, D.C. is one of the worst schools in one of the worst school districts in America.

"The mentality of excellence? We wish we could have that," said principal Harriett Kargbo, as we toured the school one morning in May. "But this," she said, pointing at the metal detector guarding the entrance, "is the reality."

This, too: Dozens of kids wandering the halls during second period. Corridors littered with fliers, candy wrappers, potato-chip bags. One second-floor foyer reeking of marijuana. ("I smell pot smoke," I said. "Really? I don't," Kargbo replied.) In the five-year history of No Child Left Behind, the school has never met the law's benchmarks; in 2007, just 24 percent of its sophomores tested "proficient" in reading and only 20 percent made the grade in math.

Of the dozen classes we visited, only in one history session were all of the students doing something approximating work. "Why isn't anyone teaching?" I asked Kargbo as I watched one student do a meticulous inventory of the contents of her wallet. "It's the end of the period," she said. Half an hour later, second period ended.

That afternoon, Kargbo was fired.

The Wrecking Ball

The woman who orchestrated the "contract nonrenewals" of Harriett Kargbo and thirty other principals that day was Michelle Rhee, the 38-year-old chancellor of D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). When she was appointed by Mayor Adrian Fenty just over a year ago, Rhee had never led a school, let alone a school system with 10,000 employees and a budget of nearly $1 billion. Since then, she has shuttered twenty-three schools, canned 15 percent of the central-office staff, fired 250 teachers who failed to get NCLB-required certification, and bought out more than 200 others. As the new school year gets under way, she is pushing a revolutionary contract that may simultaneously kill the entrenched seniority hiring system and make Washington's teachers the highest paid in America.

Rhee seems an unlikely crusader. She's a Korean-American doctor's daughter who went to an elite private academy in the burbs of Toledo, Ohio, yet she now has in her care a student population that is 83 percent black, with 80 percent poor enough to qualify for free lunch. Everything she does provokes shrieks of protest—from teachers, parents, and local politicians. But if she has any doubts about the tumultuous course she's taking, she doesn't show it.

Hiring a maverick is always risky, whether for a corporation or a government agency. But perhaps only an outsider could set in motion the fundamental change needed to transform a creaking bureaucracy. "This is a high-octane political place," says U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. "There are expectations—and an instant-gratification principle at work. Michelle is a person who will not blink first."

Rebuilding

Although the latest test scores show significant improvement over 2007 results, Rhee says it will take at least three years to begin to see sustainable academic progress in D.C. Whether she succeeds or fails in a town where everyone talks about change but few seem committed to making it happen, the implications will extend far beyond the district.

"We have a system that does wrong by poor kids of color," says Rhee, who first encountered what she calls the "stark reality" of urban public education during her senior year of high school, when she volunteered as a teacher's aide in an all-black inner-city fourth-grade classroom in Toledo. "If we're going to live up to our promise as a country—supposedly the greatest country—that has got to stop."

She knows that this is, to borrow a word from her lexicon, a "ginormous" challenge. According to Margaret Raymond, director of Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes, "D.C. is the Superfund site" of public schooling. Tim Quinn, managing director of the nonprofit Broad Superintendents Academy, calls it "the most challenging turnaround in America. This is a business involving our most emotionally loaded, important asset: our children. Imagine trying to fix Enron—but worse."

This is a system where, in a high-school world-history class, the students may get a worksheet that asks just two questions: "What is your favorite place to shop?" and "Why do you like to shop there?" Education Week, in its annual grading of the fifty states and D.C., ranked the district last, giving it D-plus overall and F for K-12 student achievement and college readiness. In the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress, D.C. also tested behind all fifty states, with only 8 percent of eighth graders proficient in math and 12 percent in reading. Just 43 percent of Washington students graduate from high school within five years, according to a 2006 study commissioned by city officials (the national average is 68 percent).

Yet D.C. spends nearly $17,000 per pupil per year, more than any other urban district except Boston. "It's not for lack of resources that our schools have failed," says council member David Catania. "We need a product commensurate to our investment. We ought to be producing fully rounded young people ready for the country's top universities. We're not."

"An unfortunate reality about large urban districts," says Kent McGuire, dean of Temple University's education school, "is that they're set up to satisfy the adults who work in them, not the kids they're supposed to serve. Kids don't vote."

In June 2007, Mayor Fenty gained oversight of the D.C. school system. This ended a setup in which the district had one CEO (the superintendent) and four "chairmen"—the mayor, the city council, the school board, and the U.S. Congress—who all had to approve every major decision. Fenty wanted a leader for DCPS who would instill accountability, and for advice, he turned to Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York City schools. Klein's counsel: Hire Michelle Rhee.

Klein had been wowed by Rhee's work with the New Teacher Project, an offshoot of Teach for America that she built into a stand-alone nonprofit with a reputa-

tion for important education research. In 2005, Rhee and her team analyzed teacher hiring in New York. Their conclusion: Filling jobs based on seniority rather than merit led inevitably to a mixture of unqualified and underqualified teachers. Klein was impressed by Rhee's ability to zero in on what matters most. "How come Google is such a great thing? Larry and Sergey got that search would be the perfect platform," he says. "Well, Michelle got the platform right here."

But understanding a platform and implementing it in the messy political reality of D.C. are vastly different things.

Apart from the two security checkpoints and the unfortunate mauve carpet, the office that Rhee shares with three aides has the feel of a Silicon Valley startup. It's called the Cowpen —a play on Fenty's Bloomberg-style bull pen—and from the moment Rhee strides in each morning, usually with a phone pressed to her ear and her open laptop held high to get the best Wi-Fi connection, the chatter is pretty much nonstop. Staffers wander in to discuss this principal or that school; Rhee yells for her chief of staff; her press secretary fends off a *Washington Post* reporter; Rhee asks nobody in particular, "Can we get some microwave popcorn?" On an easel in the corner, in Rhee's teacherly handwriting, is a reminder of their mission: ENSURING THAT ADULT ISSUES NEVER COME BEFORE THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN.

On an easel in the corner, in Rhee's teacherly handwriting, is a reminder of their mission: *Ensuring that adult issues never come before the best interest of children.*

The go-go-go energy and informal vibe are new to the central office, where reform efforts have traditionally gone to die. Ximena Hartsock, a former D.C. principal who is now in charge of bilingual and special education, recalls her shock when she arrived with the rest of Rhee's crew: "Every day, we learned something new about the unbelievable lack of efficiency." They found 4.6 million documents that had been left unfiled for up to twenty years. And they learned that, although there was a central payroll staff, some departments also had their own payroll people.

This kind of thing pushes a button in Rhee that makes her blurt—often—"That's crazy!" It seems crazy to her that she had to lobby the city council for six months for the right to fire nonunion employees. Reducing staff, she argued, would improve efficiency, save about $6 million a year, and help boost accountability. "People often think this business is just about changing schools one by one," says Warren Simmons, director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, "but a bad central office undermines schools."

Ultimately, she eliminated 118 jobs—about 15% of the central-office staff—a decision that's still drawing criticism six months later.

Rhee says she's not willing to forsake kids' futures for adults' comfort: "I'm not firing people because I'm mean." "Children are losing their lives because we're not educating them well. But we're concerned about those adults? I'm just not willing to forsake the future of thousands of kids for the comfort of a few adults."

Rhee is data-obsessed. Every aspect of her plan for the D.C. schools is rooted in data, from overhauling and streamlining DCPS's twenty-seven uncoordinated information-management systems to creating a culture of accountability for student performance (read: test scores and, for special-needs students, individualized education plans). Each time she interviews job candidates, she asks for quantitative and qualitative evidence that they can deliver results. "To work here, you've got to be a bottom-line person," Rhee tells me. "How do I know you're successful? You say, 'We raised productivity from this to this.'"

Rhee's passion for data explains why she's a fierce backer of the Bush administration's controversial No Child Left Behind legislation. "I have a laundry list of things I'd change" but the law has been essential "because it brings accountability to a system that sorely needs it," Rhee says.

The district's contract with the Washington Teachers' Union (WTU) expired last October, putting Rhee in the position of having to negotiate a new one a few months into her job.

Rhee has long argued that principals need more autonomy to hire and fire, and if the union and the city council ratify this contract, they will get it.

When the D.C. negotiators told counterparts in other cities about the contract terms, Rhee says, "They were like, 'Holy crap! How on God's green earth did you get any kind of sign-off on that?'" She plays the ingenue card: "We didn't know any better. We'd never negotiated a union contract before. We just asked."

She also offered a big carrot: D.C. public-school teachers could become America's highest paid. According to a source with knowledge of the negotiations, starting salaries, now $42,000, will rise to $55,000. (The national average is around $34,000.) A fifth-year teacher with a master's degree, now paid $52,000, could earn $99,000. Teachers whose students show strong year-over-year gains are eligible for bonuses of up to $20,000. Teachers with 15 years' experience may be able to make more than $130,000, something even a 30-year veteran can't do now.

Rhee says she has gotten this far only because WTU president George Parker is "maybe the most reform-minded union leader in the country." He is less effusive but he also sees this contract as potentially game-changing. "We have to embrace academic achievement equally as we embrace bread-and-butter issues," he says. "We're in competition with charter schools for students. We have a vested interest in our schools being successful. It's not about selling out. It's buying in."

An aide to the chancellor admits that "we're terrified" about the ratification process. But Rhee insists that the union negotiators would never put forward a contract they couldn't sell to their members, and that ultimately the bread and butter—all that pay—will win over teachers and council members.

And if she fails? She smiles. "Then I'm screwed." ■

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Empowering *Teachers* with Choice

How a Diversified Education System Benefits Teachers, Students, and America

By Dr. Vicki E. Murray

Imagine if teaching resembled the medical or legal profession. Like doctors and attorneys, teachers would choose their areas and levels of specialization, and pick from a variety of employers that best match their unique specialties and interests. Similar to hospitals and law firms today, schools would operate according to various missions, attracting and serving general or specific populations. Schools would come in many sizes and operate in both the government and private sectors. To attract and retain the best and the brightest, schools would have to offer teachers competitive salaries, flexible work schedules, options for working standard or extensive hours, opportunities for rigorous career enrichment, and a professional working environment in which teachers have autonomy to innovate and are rewarded for their successes.

This kind of labor market already exists for teachers in other parts of the world. In Japan, for example, there is great demand for high-quality teachers and a diversified education system, comprised of a centralized national school system run by the Ministry of Education and decentralized supplemental elementary (juku) and secondary (yobiko) schools run by educators. These decentralized schools, ranging from very small schools, with one teacher instructing a handful of students, to nationwide chains enrolling as many as a million students. The schools also offer diverse curricula. Some schools offer specialized preparation for high school and university entrance exams. Others offer remedial, gifted, or general educational services. Still others provide nonacademic instruction, including the arts and physical fitness.

Benefits

The benefits to teachers of such a system are not only strong parental support and involvement but also as education scholar Andrew Coulson explains:

> "The opportunity to offer personalized instruction to truly motivated students is appealing to teachers disheartened by the disengaged, disinterested attitudes commonly found among students in compulsory schools. Salaries are generally good, . . . and top juku instructors can and do earn as much as professional Japanese baseball players."

Such a diversified system fosters good teacher-school and teacher-student matches, and it also gets results. Japanese students consistently score at or near the top on international exams across a variety of subjects. There is no good reason such a diversified labor market for elementary and secondary school teachers could not exist in America, as it does for postsecondary educators.

A more diversified educational system would also channel current public demand for good teachers. A 2004 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll conducted for the Teaching Commission found that "seventy-three percent of Americans said that getting good teachers is a high priority in their communities."

Research indicates that controlling for other variables, quality teachers can boost student learning by a full level in a single year and almost eliminate the achievement gap among low-income minority students and other students.

Economic Benefits

Ensuring a diversified labor market capable of attracting and keeping such teachers serves the individual good of students as well as the common good. According to economist Eric Hanushek of Stanford University's Hoover Institution, performance on standardized tests generally, and math and science in particular, "is directly related to individual productivity and earnings and to national economic growth."

Hanushek estimates that if U.S. student performance simply remained comparable to that of their international peers throughout the 1980s instead of declining, "[Gross domestic product] in the United States would end up more than 4 percent higher than realized in 2002. With close to a $10.5 trillion economy, the unrealized gain for 2002 alone would amount to $450 billion, or more than the total annual expenditure on K-12 education."

Today, nearly a quarter of Americans are enrolled in educational institutions, making the educational system the second largest industry in the United States, accounting for about 13 million jobs, or 4 percent of the civilian work force. In fact, teachers outnumber nurses by two to one, and attorneys and professors by five to one. Since 1970, the number of elementary and secondary teachers in America

has increased from 2.3 million teachers to 3.6 million in 2006, or 57 percent.

By 2014, that number is projected to reach nearly 4 million. A diversified education system could therefore help ensure that the teacher labor market and the national economy remain robust. A diversified system would also be more responsive to the needs of women, the teaching force's largest constituency. For the past 40 years, roughly 75 percent of all elementary and secondary school teachers have been women, and today women outnumber men by more than three to one among full-time elementary and secondary school teachers.

This trend is expected to continue. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) explains that "one of the reasons for the interest in teaching among women is the opportunity it affords to take time out to raise a family, which means there is likely to continue to be relatively strong interest in teaching as a profession among women in spite of increased job opportunities elsewhere."

Competing for Workers

As wage parity between men and women is increasingly achieved across professions, ensuring that the teaching profession remains attractive to talented women is an important public policy concern. "For most of U.S. history, the nation has been able to operate schools at low cost by exploiting the trapped labor force of educated women who had few other opportunities," notes MIT economics Professor Peter Temin. "Now schools must compete with other mentally and financially rewarding occupations as they recruit teachers." Recent research by Harvard University economist Caroline M. Hoxby clarifies those findings.

Hoxby explains that "the likelihood that a highly talented female (one ranked among the top 10 percent of all high schoolers) will become a teacher fell from roughly 20 percent in 1964 to just over 11 percent in 2000." Yet she finds that it is not higher salaries in other professions that are drawing talented women away from teaching but rather the lack of merit pay in teaching:

> [W]e cannot expect high-performing college graduates to continue to enter teaching if that is the one profession in which pay is decoupled from performance. Indeed, other professions have been raising the reward for performance over the past few decades. ...To attract high-aptitude women back into teaching, school districts need to reward teachers in the same way that college graduates are paid in other professions—that is, according to their performance.

In other words, when it comes to influencing a talented woman's decision to enter a profession, money does matter, but merit pay apparently matters more. Lucrative paychecks alone do not lure highly motivated and dedicated individuals into their professions. Such individuals want to make a positive contribution to society.

The schools those teachers left behind are taking notice because their employees now have more appealing teaching options.

Nevertheless, in a free society, hard-working professionals deserve an equal opportunity to earn an honest, competitive living without barriers preventing them from being fairly compensated. As with public support for good doctors and attorneys, the Teaching Commission finds that having good teachers in their communities is a top priority for the overwhelming majority of Americans. This support suggests that parents would certainly be willing to pay more for good teachers to educate their children, just as they are willing to pay for quality medical care and legal services.

Rewarding Performance

A prevalent notion is that paying teachers for performance would undermine collegiality. Survey results of educator schools from eight states where pay is based on performance indicate otherwise. Seventy percent of teachers agree or strongly agree that more effective teachers should be paid more. Likewise, when asked about the level of collegiality at their schools since enacting performance pay, 70 percent of teachers responded that the level of collegiality at their schools was high or very high.

Public- and private-school teachers' perceptions about teaching and conditions at their schools differ significantly. On average, 22 percent more private-school teachers indicate they are satisfied with their class sizes and their school's enforcement of student behavior rules, have the materials they need, and feel supported by fellow teachers, administrators, and parents than public-school teachers. Yet today, public- and private-school classrooms average about fifteen students. Since class sizes were first tracked in 1955, private schools have halved their average pupil/teacher ratio from a high of 32:1 to less than 16:1. Likewise, public schools have reduced their average pupil/teacher ratio from a high of 27:1 to less than 16:1.

Even though public and private classrooms typically have fewer than sixteen students, 83 percent more public-school teachers indicate that paperwork and other routine duties, student misbehavior, tardiness, and cutting class interfere with their teaching.

Alarmingly, survey responses of public-school teachers indicate that they are twice as likely as private-school teachers to sometimes feel that doing their best is a waste of time and more than four times as likely to worry about job security.

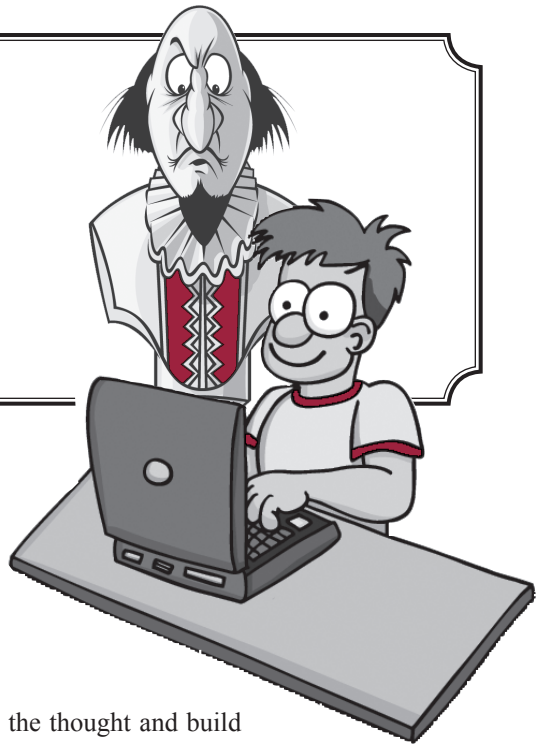
Today, more teachers are creating the kinds of schools where they want to work and where parents want their children to learn. The schools those teachers left behind are taking notice because their employees now have more appealing teaching options. Such options empower teachers and contribute to an improved working and learning environment. These efforts are recent but promising. ■

Vicki E. Murray is Senior Policy Fellow, Education Studies, at the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy (PRI). This article is reprinted from a report by the same name. To read it, visit www.iwf.org.

TBONTB

TRANSLATION

(To be, or not to be.)



Shakespeare Didn't Blog

Author Says Texting and Testing Are Destroying Kids' Writing Style

Somewhere out there is the mind that will produce the next great American novel. If, however, that would-be author is under the age of 18, the words they write may be more of "SOZ" and "TGGTG" than beautiful, flowing prose.

"We have a whole generation being raised without communication skills," says Jacquie Ream, former teacher and author of *K.I.S.S. Keep It Short and Simple* (Book Publishers Network). She contends text messaging and the internet are destroying the way our kids read, think, and write.

A recent National Center for Education Statistics study reports only one out of four high school seniors is a proficient writer. A College Board survey of the nations blue-chip companies found only two -thirds of their employees are capable writers.

"These kids aren't learning to spell. They're learning acronyms and shorthand," says Ream, "Text messaging is destroying the written word. The students aren't writing letters, they're typing into their cell phones one line at a time. Feelings aren't communicated with words when your texting; emotions are sideways smiley faces. Kids are typing shorthand jargon that isn't even a complete thought."

To read Jacquie Ream's book *K.I.S.S. Keep It Short and Simple,* visit www.reamink.com

Web of Confusion

Reading may not be the problem. Neilson/NetRatings reports the average 12 to 17-year-old visits more than 1,400 web pages a month. Ask that average teenager what they read, and they may be able to tell you. Ask the average teenager what their opinion is on that blog or article, and you may find them fumbling for thoughts that are their own.

"What's not taught today," says Ream, "is critical thinking skills. Teachers are forced to use what little classroom time they have to teach to the standardized tests. The kids learn how to regurgitate information to parrot it back for the correct answer, but they can't process the thought and build on it."

School system money is often tied into the standardized testing results. Many teachers complain of being pressured to spend so much time teaching to the test, that they don't have the time to guide the children into true, thought-provoking learning.

"There's a whole generation that can't come up with new ideas," says Ream. "And even if they did have a breakthrough thought or opinion of their own, they couldn't share it with the rest of us."

This generation, however, isn't a complete "write-off." Ream says the parents can make a big difference in the way their children communicate. She suggests reading the same book your teenager is reading—then trying to open a dinner table conversation about the plot of that novel.

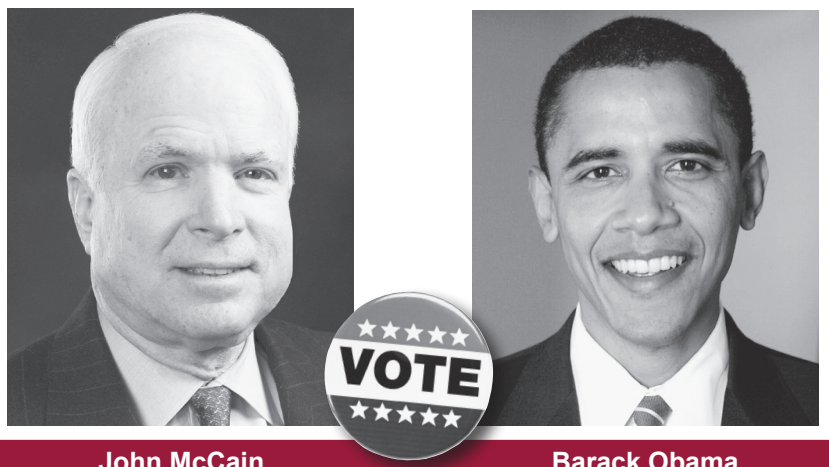
K.I.S.S.

Ream says writing is a skill that can be learned. Her book, *K.I.S.S. Keep It Short and Simple* lays out a formula she says makes writing easier: Teach your kids to organize their thoughts on paper; compare the subject with others to show how the ideas are similar; contrast the subject with others to show how the concept is different; and interrelate—write the essay to show how the subject relates to the reader.

Every generation has great minds with great thoughts that can guide the rest of us. If teenagers aren't taught to groom their opinions and ideas so that they can write effectively, society will lose out on a generation of creativity. "If we let these kids get caught up in technology, if we let politicians get caught up in testing, it's America as a whole that loses out on great words, thoughts, and novels that will never be written." ■

2008 Presidential Candidates' Views on Education

November 4th is just around the corner and both presidential candidates have stepped up the discussion on issues important to the electorate, including education. While it can be difficult to sift through all the rhetoric to understand where each candidate truly stands, it is vital for every voter to be well informed before they go to the polls. What follows is a breakdown of each candidate's positions on key issues related to education and teachers in the classroom.



	John McCain	Barack Obama
Supports charter schools	Yes	Yes
Supports programs that allow federal funds to "follow the child"	Yes	No
Supports merit-based pay programs for teachers	Yes	Yes
Supports accountability measures currently in place through NCLB	Yes	No
Supports the use of federal funds to expand pre-K programs	No	Yes
Supports the expansion of virtual schools and other online education programs	Yes	No
Supports a federal card-check law making it easier to unionize teachers	No	Yes
Supports alternative certification for teachers	Yes	Yes
Supports the expansion of programs using federal funds for higher education	No	Yes

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Two Million Teachers Now Corralled Into Unions

1.3 Million Educators are Forced to Pay Dues

As the total number of America's teachers corralled into union collectives crosses the two million mark, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation and the Association of American Educators Foundation have launched a campaign to inform educators about their rights and professional alternatives to forced unionism. They will also inform teachers of professional associations that provide services to teachers who do not want to associate with the increasingly militant and political teacher unions. Many teachers object to the political agenda of teacher unions, while others object to knee-jerk union obstruction of school reforms that could increase the quality of education for students.

The public information campaign comes as a new study reveals the number of teachers forced under union "representation" has reached alarming heights. According to a National Institute for Labor Relations Research study released last month, 2 million teachers nationwide are now compelled to accept union monopoly control, meaning it is illegal for schools to bargain with individual teachers over employment terms or compensate them based on individual merit.

The study conservatively estimates that the two national teacher unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), now collect $1.3 billion dollars annually from 1.3 million teachers and thousands of other school employees in the twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia that sanction the firing of school employees for refusal to pay NEA or AFT union dues or fees.

With a combined total of roughly $2 billion in dues flowing into union coffers every year from states with and without right-to-work protections for teachers, NEA and AFT union chiefs are largely able to control education policy, elect hundreds of politicians, and lobby against education reforms, including test-proposals to pay high-performing educators more through performance pay systems. Teacher union officials' $2 billion dollar war chest, derived mostly from forced union dues, also makes them a major political force to obtain more special union privileges. The NEA, for example, has announced it will spend $50 million on elections this fall, not including state and local affiliates. ■

For more information, go to the home page of the AAE website at www.aaeteachers.org and click on the "What you should know about your rights in a compulsory union state."

Notice to Teachers from the Department of Labor

The Department is pleased to announce that www.UnionReports.gov is the new address for the Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS) Online Public Disclosure Room found on www.DOL.gov.

UnionReports.gov is a DOL webpage used to maximize public disclosure of financial reporting of unions required by the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 and the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, which are enforced by DOL's Office of Labor-Management Standards. These reports are an essential research tool for members of labor organizations, government agencies, and the public. UnionReports.gov allows union members to review union's financial reports, as well as other important information.

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