

Education Matters

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Does Demography Dictate Destiny?

The Radical Success of Florida's K-12 Reforms

By Matthew Ladner and Dan Lips

Some experts say states with growing Hispanic populations are doomed to fail, weighed down with ineffective school systems and abysmal test scores. One demographer at an academic conference went so far as to predict that the Southwest will become the “Appalachia of the 21st Century.”

His logic was simple: Hispanic populations are growing rapidly; Hispanic students underperform academically, drop out of school in high numbers, and attend colleges and universities in low numbers. Hispanic students finish college in still smaller numbers.

Does demography dictate destiny in K-12 education? Should states with large or growing Hispanic populations accept that they will never succeed and ask for exceptions to federal accountability standards? To the contrary, statistics show that with systemic education reform, states can raise the academic performance of Hispanic children. That's what Florida did.

Improving Academic Achievement in Florida

Florida began the 1990s with low fourth-grade reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and they declined between 1992 and 1998. However, between

1998 and 2007, the percentage of Florida students scoring basic or above increased by more than three times compared with those in Arizona, a state with similar student demographics and per-student funding.

Improvement in test scores among minority students has likewise been extremely impressive. In 2007, the average NAEP reading score—a test conducted in English—for Hispanic fourth-graders in Florida was higher than the overall average NAEP reading scores of all students in Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

Education Reform in Florida—How the State Improved Achievement

It is reasonable to conclude that Florida's education reforms are in part responsible for higher student achievement. Given the impressive progress in students' academic achievement, policymakers in other states should study those reforms.

In his first state-of-the-state speech in 1999, Gov. Jeb Bush outlined broad categories for reform. First, Florida would imple-



// The number of Hispanic and African-American students passing AP exams has more than tripled since 1998. Florida now has a ratio of Hispanic students passing AP exams almost eight times higher than Arizona. //

ment annual testing in grades 3 through 10 and rank schools based on achievement. Second, they would end social promotion—the practice of promoting students to higher grades even if they had not completed the academic requirements of the previous grade. Third, some funding would be tied to performance—rewarding successful schools with additional funding and autonomy. Fourth, the state would provide additional funding for struggling schools while allowing parents the option of transferring their child to a better school.

Academic Testing and Accountability

In 1999, Florida enacted the “A+ Accountability Plan,” which became the foundation of school reform efforts in the state. The A+ Plan required that students in grades 3 through 10 be tested annually in reading and math on the state FCAT assessment system.

The state also created a new accountability system for schools based on the FCAT assessment. Schools that earned high marks received funding bonuses and greater autonomy. The state required schools receiving an “F” grade twice over a four-year period to implement state-sanctioned reforms.

Students were also held accountable for their performance. The A+ Plan ended social promotion. Students were required to meet a level of academic achievement before proceeding to the next grade.

Curriculum and Academic Standards

A major focus in Florida’s curriculum reforms over the past decade has been to improve reading instruction. In 2002, the state implemented the initiative “Just Read, Florida!” to help reach that goal. Among other programs, the initiative created new academies to train teachers in reading instruction and provided for the hiring of 2,000 reading coaches in public schools across the states.

Improving Teacher Quality

Teacher quality is a leading factor affecting how students perform in the classroom. All public school systems face the challenge of attracting and retaining high-quality teachers. Florida’s challenge was exacerbated by a 2002 ballot initiative that created a state constitutional amendment establishing maximum class sizes in the state’s public schools.

Traditionally, most public school systems have tried to ensure teacher quality by establishing certification requirements and licensing regimes. However, this strategy has had questionable results. Studies have found little relationship between certification and student test score gains, and suggest that selectively retaining teachers demonstrating gains in early years of teaching would be a far more effective method for increasing teacher quality than mere certification.

Over the past decade, Florida enacted new policies for attract-

ing and rewarding high-quality teachers. First, Florida established policies to allow for alternative paths to teacher certification. The purpose of these policies was to attract high-quality teachers to the classroom who otherwise would not consider teaching as a profession given the barrier created by the traditional teacher certification requirements.

For example, qualified professionals who wish to become teachers in Florida can attend “Educator Preparation Institutes” that facilitate these career transitions. Districts are also required to offer their own forms of alternative certification. Today, about half of all new teachers in Florida are coming through alternative certification programs.

Florida also offers performance pay for teachers. Traditionally, most public school systems have compensated public school teachers based on the tenure of their service. Florida, however, implemented reforms to provide bonuses to highly effective teachers.

In 2007, Florida’s performance pay system offered a total of \$147 million annually in state aid to school districts to pay performance bonuses to teachers. Bonuses can reach up to 10 percent of a teacher’s pay. Through this program, schools are awarded funds to provide bonuses to personnel who contribute to measurable improvement in students’ academic achievement.

Parental Choice Options

The A+ Accountability Plan also established new school choice options for families. Students attending any school receiving two “F” grades in any four-year period became eligible for a voucher they could use to attend another public or private school. This policy helped hundreds of children attend a school of their parents’ choice.

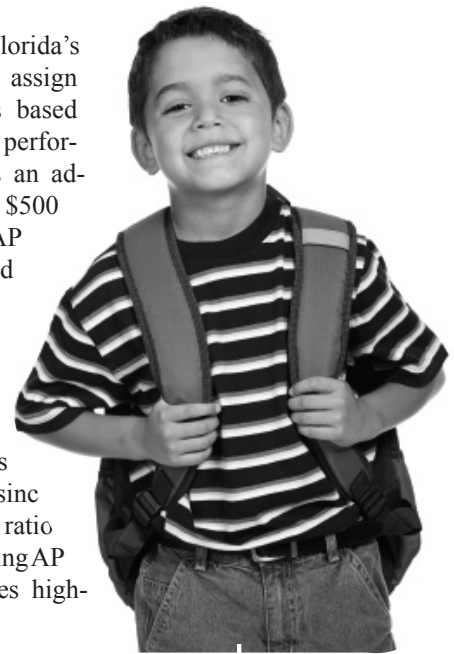
In addition to the A+ Plan, Florida policymakers offered families a range of public and private school choice options, including:

- The McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities. Since 2000-2001, Florida has offered private school tuition scholarships to children with disabilities through the McKay Scholarship Program.
- Step Up for Students Corporate Tax Credits for Private School Scholarships. Since 2001, Florida has also offered corporations a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to fund private school scholarships for disadvantaged children.
- Charter Schools. Florida has one of the strongest charter school laws in the country.
- Virtual Education. Florida offers students the ability to learn online through virtual education.

Florida’s Increased Minority College Preparation

The program relied heavily on incentives, creating an AP Teacher Bonus of \$50 for every student who passed the test, up to \$2,000. The program also created an incentive for the school, an additional \$650 per student who passed an AP exam. Florida officials carefully wrote this bonus into the funding formula so that it went to the school, not to the school district.

Furthermore, using Florida’s A+ designations, which assign letter grades to schools based upon overall student performance, Florida provides an additional school bonus of \$500 per student passing an AP exam for schools rated “D” or “F.” The results have been extremely impressive: The number of Hispanic and African-American students passing AP exams has more than tripled since 1998. Florida now has a ratio of Hispanic students passing AP exams almost eight times higher than Arizona.



Florida’s Reforms Are a Beginning, Not an End

The comprehensive education reforms Florida policymakers have implemented over the past decade appear to be having a positive impact. Specifically, initial evidence suggests that ending social promotion, increasing school accountability, and expanding parental choice in education are contributing to improved academic achievement and public school performance. Florida students are improving academically at a higher rate than are students across the country, and with comparatively less funding. Importantly, children from minority populations are making the greatest improvements—proof that Florida is making progress in reducing the achievement gap.

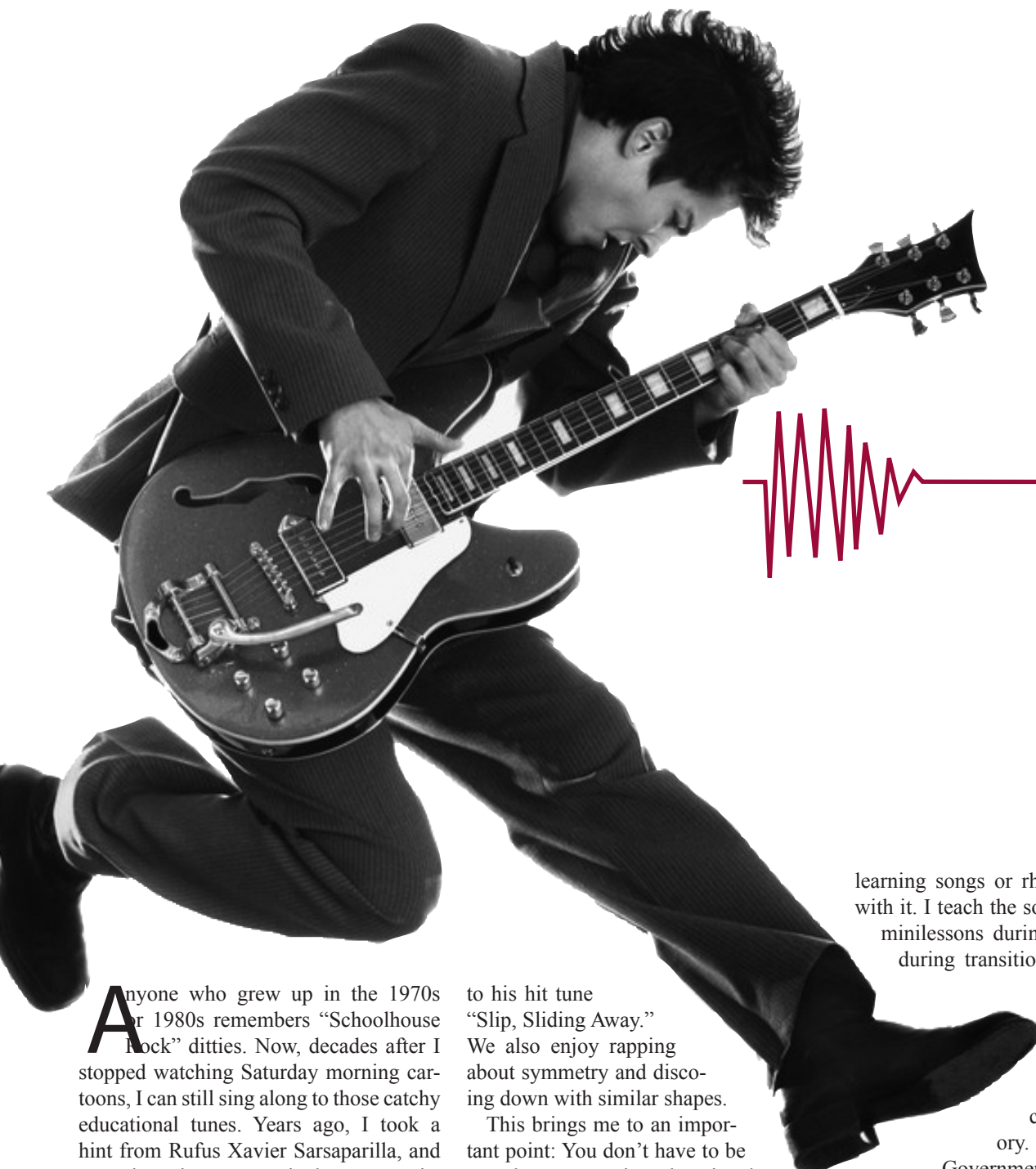
In Florida, schools and teachers make more money the old-fashioned way: They earn it. The days of “provide money first, hope for results later” must end, in Washington and our state capitals.

Florida’s success should inspire replication in other states, but its reforms should be viewed as a starting point, not a finish line. States should follow Florida’s lead in combining incentive- and instruction-based reforms. In fact, they should take them even further. America’s disadvantaged children await these tragically overdue reforms. ■



Matthew Ladner (pictured left) is vice president of research for the Goldwater Institute and a member of the ALEC Education Task Force. Dan Lips is a senior fellow at the Goldwater Institute.

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S R R

Anyone who grew up in the 1970s or 1980s remembers “Schoolhouse Rock” ditties. Now, decades after I stopped watching Saturday morning cartoons, I can still sing along to those catchy educational tunes. Years ago, I took a hint from Rufus Xavier Sarsaparilla, and started putting my curriculum to music. Over time, I have noticed that music and rhymes are key to making concepts nearly “forget-proof.” Songs and rhymes help with the recall of important information and have lasting effects on learning.

The obvious jumping-off point to a musical curriculum is math fact memorization. My classes have been skip-counting to “Happy Birthday 8s” and “Silent Night 7s” for years. I’ve found that geometry concepts are also easy to set to music. Paul Simon would be impressed to hear third graders sing, “Flip, Slide and a Turn”

to his hit tune “Slip, Sliding Away.” We also enjoy rapping about symmetry and disco-ing down with similar shapes.

This brings me to an important point: You don’t have to be a rock star to write educational songs. All you need to do is borrow some catchy tunes that have already been created. Here’s another point: If you can’t sing, it doesn’t matter. The kids won’t care! Whenever my voice is hoarse, I have several students who can carry the tune without me.

With an array of math jingles under my belt, I went to work putting together areas of the curriculum to music. We can sing about asteroids and the atmosphere all the way to yaks and zebras in the food chain. Each science unit I cover has ten to fifteen

learning songs or rhymes that go along with it. I teach the songs and concepts in minilessons during the unit. We sing during transitional times and when

we start or end a subject. By test time, kids have the songs along with the concepts committed to memory.

Government and economics are difficult concepts to teach young kids, so putting key information to music has certainly proved educationally useful. I created rhymes like:

*Executive—leaders—governor, mayor, pres.
Legislative—lawmakers—they are the Congress, yes
Judicial—the judges—Supreme Court is the top
Those are the branches of government
Now I have to stop.*

With the kids enjoying social studies, and learning concepts like gangbusters, it was inevitable that my next move would be to create a high-energy large-cast pro-

Schoolhouse Rock New Wind

Put your curricula to music
and join in as your students
—sing their way to learning!

By Disa Rice

duction about the government and its services. Hundreds of parents and grandparents, along with different community leaders who had been our speakers throughout the unit, watched our production of “The Great Third Grade Government Show.” It was fun sharing what we had learned with a little more razzle-dazzle than expected in a class presentation about the government.

I’m not saying all teachers need to write their own musical, but if you enjoy singing and want to vary your teaching style, sprinkle a little music into your curriculum. ■



Disa Rice teaches third grade at Sigrist Elementary in Platte County, Missouri, R-3. Reprinted with permission of School & Community magazine, a publication of Missouri State Teachers Association.

Curricular Song writing Made Simple

1. Jot down facts or pull out a textbook with the information you want the kids to learn.
2. Consult a list of songs you know. These songs can be popular songs, retro hits, or old favorites. Included you will find a trio of websites that will give you titles, words, and music background for several children’s songs and patriotic classics.
3. Keep a rhyming dictionary handy, and start putting facts and concepts to music.
4. Make sure you keep your songs short and easy. Kids will learn quicker and remember longer if the songs are quick and catchy.
5. Make a DVD or an audiotape of you singing the songs to use in class. This really helps when you have laryngitis or a substitute.

Start with a small section of your curriculum and see how you progress. Songwriting is fun and music makes things memorable. So broaden your repertoire of teaching strategies and let your class entertain you as they sing themselves smarter!

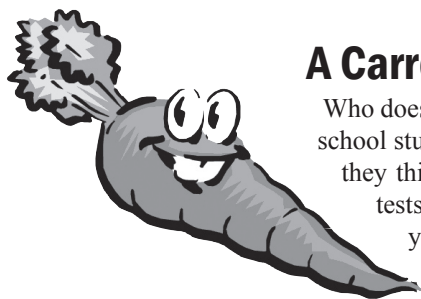
Ideas for Upper Grades

Curricular objectives are a little different as children ascend into middle school and high school, but the main goal is still the same: Students need to learn the material!

Some of the most helpful mnemonic devices were given to me by my high school teachers and college professors. If you want to use song writing in the upper grades, let your students create the songs. You might have to model how to do it, and give them a jumping-off point, but they can do it. Consider offering extra credit. Who knows, by making older kids write their own learning songs and rhymes, you may be provided with a new learning device that will help your classes for years to come.

Websites

<http://library.thinkquest.org/>
<http://712educators.about.com>



A Carrot That Just May Work

Who doesn't count down the days to the end of school? For high school students in Mesquite, Texas, that day may be sooner than they think—provided they pass all their classes and the state tests. District leaders are proposing a deal for students: pass your classes and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and you can get out of school a week early. They see it as a way to kill two birds with one stone: incentivize working harder, while making it possible to give students who are struggling more one-on-one tutoring time (during the last week of the year, at least). “It just seems like a great opportunity to work with a smaller number of students who may have some more intensive needs,” muses district administrator Jeannie Stone. Sure, we should be careful about taking kids out of classrooms when they spend so few days in them as it is, but just as incentives work for adults, they work for teenagers, too. Further, unlike other green-tinged carrots, this one retains its orange hue, eschewing the realm of bribes in favor of rewards. It seems like there's little to be lost by giving this approach a try. ■

Educators as Entrepreneurs

Giving teachers more freedom to negotiate their contracts, pay, and working conditions would lead to better instruction and more professional satisfaction, according to a new study, “Teachers as Entrepreneurs,” by Tom Neumark, a visiting fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute.

According to the study, “Under the current model, teachers only have one union attempting to represent them. If multiple unions were competing to convince teachers to choose them as their representative, the resulting competition would likely

drive down union dues and increase benefits.”

Regarding claims that one union is best able to represent all teachers, Neumark argues that teachers at different stages of their career often have different or competing concerns. Additionally, Neumark says that most issues are disputed at individual schools and rarely reach the official grievance level.

For the full report, go to <http://www.md-policy.org/research/detail/teachers-as-entrepreneurs>

Become a Better Teacher or Street Mime

The Massachusetts Teachers Association offered summer workshops so that teachers could obtain their state-mandated “professional development points,” or PDPs. Jamie Gass of the Pioneer Institute compiled a top ten list of MTA's offerings. They included:

- Lessons through Balloon Twisting
- Easy Tie-Dye
- Use Your Noodle (“improvisational theater skills”)
- Native American Bead Weaving

Many of the other seminars involve union operations and activism, so it seems as though you would be prepared to either walk a picket line or entertain those walking the picket line.

Source—Education Intelligence Agency, www.eiaonline.com



SQUEEZED

The Tradeoff between Teacher Wages and Layoffs to Meet Budget Cuts

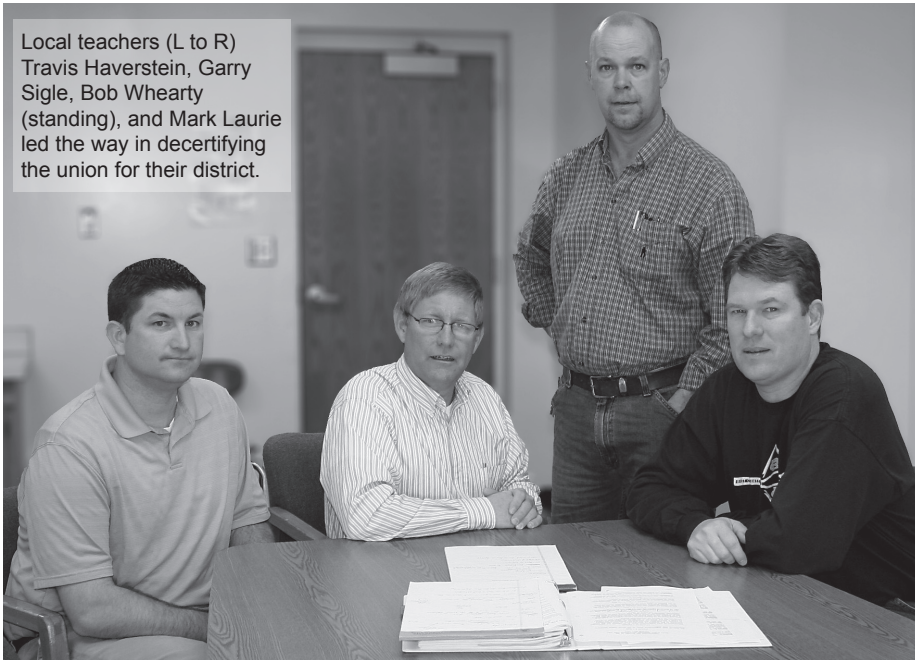
If you want to avoid sharp increases in class size, you have to pick your poison when it comes to budget slashing, according to a hypothetical analysis done by Marguerite Roza.

On average, the teacher pay schedule increases 3 percent per year of work; that's in addition to a 3 percent average annual cost of living increase. Together, this means the typical public-school teacher will make 6 percent more each year. But with district budgets squeezed by the economy, most districts cannot afford those increases without laying off teachers.

Roza runs the numbers through five scenarios, from maintaining the pay increases and the cost of living adjustments to rolling back salaries 5 percent and abandoning the 3 percent salary step increase. Keeping the salary scale as is will result in 17 percent class size increase and laying off 14 percent of the teacher work force. Freezing salaries completely (no step increase; no cost of living increase) still means 7 percent of the teacher work force must be laid off and class sizes will increase by a corresponding 8 percent. But abandoning the step scale all together and slashing salaries by 5 percent will keep both layoffs and class size increases at bay. All options are presented in a handy and easy-to-understand table. Teachers can't have it all when faced with a down economy. ■

Source—Marguerite Roza, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington. For more information on this analysis, visit <http://fordham.citysoft.org>.

Local teachers (L to R) Travis Haverstein, Garry Sigle, Bob Whearty (standing), and Mark Laurie led the way in decertifying the union for their district.



Local Teachers Union in Kansas Decertifies from State and National Unions

Riley County Educators (RCE), the local union for the teachers of Riley County, Kansas, made an historic move, as they voted to decertify from the Kansas National Education Association (KNEA) and the National Education Association (NEA). RCE will now serve as the negotiating agent for the school district, a position that had previously been held by the Riley County Education Association (RCEA), a KNEA/NEA chapter.

The process to decertify officially began in November 2008, when several teachers in the district joined together to form a new association. They filed the necessary paperwork to be able to be considered as a bargaining unit, and held an official election to remove the RCEA, along with its state and national affiliations, and appoint the RCE as the official negotiating representative for the district.

“We are very happy to be able to represent the teachers of Riley County,” said Garry Sigle, spokesperson for RCE. “We just want all teachers in the district to have the opportunity to be an officer in the organization or sit at the negotiating table.”

Other benefits previously provided by KNEA to RCEA members, such as liability insurance and legal protection, will be available to all members of RCE from the Association of American Educators (AAE).

“We are pleased to assist RCE’s efforts in becoming a local-only organization,” said La Rae Munk, AAE Director of Legal Services. “Teachers should have the right to be self-governed and make their

own decisions regarding their employment.”

This decision is the latest in a budding nationwide movement of teachers seeking a more self-governed approach when it comes to collective bargaining. Teachers in Washington, California, Illinois, and Iowa, among others, have all chosen either self-representation or local union representation over membership in the state and national unions. ■

If you would like more information on the process of forming an independent local association of teachers in your district, contact La Rae Munk at munk@aaeteachers.org.

This decision is the latest in a budding nationwide movement of teachers seeking a more self-governed approach when it comes to collective bargaining.

Illinois Teachers Decertify

“In addition to an annual savings of nearly \$400 in individual dues, we are now members of a professional organization that cares about students, teachers and education.”

Dear Association of American Educators,

I would like to thank you for your ongoing assistance to the Century Education Association in Ullin, Illinois. Without AAE, our association would not have had the necessary knowledge or resources to disaffiliate from and decertify the Illinois Education Association and National Education Association. We did not have the experience or expertise needed to even begin the process with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board. Your help, with the assistance of attorney La Rae Munk, was invaluable as we navigated through the long and stressful process. IEA-NEA continued to harass, intimidate, and mislead us with half-truths and misinformation. We would never have persevered without your encouragement and assistance.

The benefits of membership in the Association of American Educators are a blessing to me personally and to our association. In addition to an annual savings of nearly \$400 in individual dues, we are now members of a professional organization that cares about students, teachers, and education. This has been a truly refreshing change from membership in the NEA political machine that really never appeared to be concerned about anything except self-perpetuation.

Under the leadership of IEA-NEA, when compared to similar school districts, our teachers had become the lowest paid in the surrounding area. After joining AAE, we settled a 3-year contract with our district and received the largest pay increase I can remember in my 23 years with the district. Since becoming a local-only association, our salary is more in line with nearby districts with similar demographics. This would not have been possible without the professional guidance and training that we received through AAE from La Rae Munk.

I just want to let you know that you ARE making a difference, and you are very much appreciated. I want to encourage you to continue with what you are doing. America’s children, schools, and teachers need you.

Debra Goins
Century CUSD #100



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