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Hold Schools Accountable

What's wrong with holding public schools accountable for failing to educate minority children?

Nothing, if you agree that education is one of the great civil rights struggles of our day.

Everything, if you ask the Connecticut Education Association.

Former NAACP leader Michael Meyers wrote recently in *The Wall Street Journal* that harmonious race relations “will fall into place if young blacks overcome illiteracy, stay in school, and are inculcated with a love for learning and for the pursuit of excellence.” What does Meyers think will bring this about? “Holding school authorities accountable.”

The CEA and its national parent union, the National Education Association, do not want this accountability.

Just this Monday, a federal judge revived a lawsuit by NEA, CEA, and other vested interests against No Child Left Behind, President Bush's signature education law. If the lawsuit succeeds, it will almost certainly derail the law as well as the improvements being proposed for the law's reauthorization, which Congress has to take up soon.

One important revision would create new bonuses for good teachers by linking their pay to students' performance on tests. In order to have equality of opportunity, disadvantaged minorities need schools (and especially teachers) that are held accountable for student learning. By opposing this idea, the NEA and CEA have aligned themselves firmly against the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, the National Urban League, the National Council of La Raza, and other civil rights groups.

The teacher accountability debate highlights the most prominent divide between the NEA/CEA agenda and the needs of low-income minorities, but it's hardly the only one.

In Connecticut, U.S. Department of Education sta-

tistics indicate, a mere 0.04% of tenured teachers are terminated for poor performance a year. It defies common sense to believe that more don't need to be weeded out. Antiquated tenure laws — defended to the death by teachers unions — make it practically impossible to get rid of teachers who don't teach. And as long as the NEA and CEA defend incompetent teachers, the civil rights struggle for accountability in schools will be an uphill battle.

It gets worse. Union contracts also encourage qualified teachers to flee cities for the suburbs, away from the students that need them most.

The New Teacher Project has found that union rules help slow down new teacher hiring in cities to the point where job offers aren't handed out until late summer or the beginning of the new school year. Suburban districts' typically looser union rules help them make job offers much earlier, skimming off the cream of the crop — the better-skilled educators who are so desperately needed by poor and minority children in the cities.

The single greatest roadblock to educational opportunity posed by the NEA and CEA — and the biggest threat to civil rights — is the unions' steadfast opposition to school choice, a simple idea giving parents the power to remove their children from a failing public school and send them to better schools.

The wealthy already enjoy choice, whether through expensive private schools or just by packing up and moving to live near better schools. Low-income families, however, rarely share in such opportunities, since financial circumstances typically keep them from escaping failing public schools into ones that actually teach.

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