

Rosen: Douglas County school board leads the way

By Mike Rosen *The Denver Post*

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The way the political game is played in most urban and suburban school districts, teachers unions recruit, endorse and bankroll candidates who will reliably support the union and its liberal agenda. The union is organized and well-financed to win elections. Individual parents are not organized or well-financed. This is what Milton Friedman called the advantage of the concentrated vs. the diffuse interest.

In 2009, conservatives and Republicans who dominate Douglas County won a rare victory in school district politics. They elected a slate of candidates who challenged the liberal, pro-union majority on their school board. Since then, the Dougco board has implemented a reform agenda that includes true merit pay based on individual performance, not seniority and post-graduate college credits of dubious value. Poorly performing teachers can be dismissed; talented teachers can be rewarded. Teachers with specialties in high demand and short supply can be paid premiums. Rigorous instruction in basic academics is emphasized instead of touchy-feely social engineering.

A pilot program for true parental choice was crafted. Pay and benefits (including PERA retirement) is no longer provided for non-teaching union officials at the district's expense. In fact, the Dougco board got rid of the union entirely when its collective bargaining agreement expired.

A small number of teachers didn't like the changes and left. Others were easily found to take their place, and the district has a long waiting list of applicants. A remnant of the rump Dougco teachers union remains, a handful of staffers and organizers still being paid out of union coffers. It and its national parent are thirsting to regain power in the upcoming November election and are endorsing a slate of pro-union, liberal Democratic candidates for the school board. If they win, the first thing they'll do is bring back the union.

This is a pivotal election with national ramifications. Teachers unions are the greatest obstacle to substantive public school reform and want desperately to strangle the Dougco non-union baby in its crib.

When teachers unions claim their efforts are "for the children," don't you believe it. Unions are all about the rank and file: their compensation, job security and restrictive work rules. As Albert Shanker, former union head of the American Federation of Teachers once candidly proclaimed, "When school children start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of children."

Above all, labor unions are collectives, whether they represent teachers, assembly-line workers or government employees, the political dynamics are the same. And what they hate most is competition, whether it's competition with private-sector educational choices or, especially, competition within its rank and file. The institutional credo of unions is to protect their least competent workers from their most competent. That's why they demand collective compensation and oppose individual merit pay.

Dougco parents are caught in the middle of a political war. On one side are vested union interests and their long-favored political party, the Democrats who empower them. On the other is an incumbent Republican school-board majority that's replaced the educratic model with innovative, quality education replete with choices and responsive to parents and students as *customers*, not captives.

You may like the third-grade teacher who's your next-door neighbor. And she may be hard- working and competent as an individual. But she's just a cog in the union wheel when it comes to collective public school policy. Retain the Republican board, keep the union out and she'll be even better. And that really would be for the children — and for their parents and taxpayers.

Freelance columnist Mike Rosen's radio show airs weekdays from 9 a.m. to noon on 850-KOA.