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A lesson in union power

By David Harsanyi

<mailto:dharsanyi@denverpost.com?subject=The%20Denver%20Post:%20A%20lesson%20in%20union%20power>

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Critics are eager to point out that teachers unions seem more concerned with protecting their members — particularly failing teachers — than they are in helping students achieve.

Unions have bolstered this perception by obstructing public education reform, by pouring money into candidates who hinder reform on the legislative level and by deploying squadrons of lawyers whenever, by some miracle, reform happens to trickle through any bureaucratic cracks.

The Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), however, took it a step further this week when it denied Bruce Randolph School's request for more autonomy. The union undermined its own members.

Educational reform, union leaders often tell us, is the purview of teachers and administrators, not politicians. Teachers are the ones, the union says, who understand the special needs of students, parents and the unique neighborhoods they operate within.

That's why listening to union president Kim Ursetta defending the DCTA's decision was an excruciating experience for all. Her answers were illogical and her position untenable.

Let's keep in mind that a majority of Bruce Randolph teachers signed off on the school's request, that the Denver school board — not exactly a gang of union-busting hardliners — voted unanimously to allow autonomy, and Denver Public Schools Superintendent Michael Bennet also backed the school's proposal.

After the union vote, Bennet said, "I honestly don't understand it. The Bruce Randolph proposal seemed to me to be a great idea for our kids, for the district and for the union."

Now, Bennet only needs to point to a letter sent out by Ursetta — misleadingly titled "Waivers Granted to BRS" — to point out just how absurd the union's position is:

"In good conscience," states the document, "we cannot grant the extensive waiver requested that would favor Bruce Randolph teachers and students at the expense of other teachers and students in the district."

If the agreement *favors* Bruce Randolph School, then, logically, doesn't that mean the idea is constructive? Doesn't it also mean that modest autonomy for schools with a viable, teacher-approved plan should be heard? And does it not imply that every school in

Denver is now hampered by a broken system?

"No, no, no," says the DCTA.

Don't worry, though, those folks promise to form a committee and . . . blah blah blah.

Also, let's remember that the union's regulations book is about an inch thick. So for it to refer to Bruce Randolph's appeal as "extensive," is, well . . . it borders on the comical.

The school would like to control its own budget, it would like to hire teachers on its own timeline, and it would like to avoid being stuck with incompetent staff. You can read the document yourself in less than five minutes.

So "extensive" are these "favors" that the union has pre-emptively stated it would not entertain any other requests.

Comical, as well, is the union's contention that it had granted Bruce Randolph many concessions.

The union, which has been stalling the entire process, knows very well that Bruce Randolph re-enters negotiations it would need to restart the entire voting process from scratch. In other words, the DCTA they would be sucked back into the bureaucratic nightmare it was trying to avoid in the first place. And another year would be lost.

Fortunately, principal Kristin Waters says she will move forward with the plan. Hopefully, other schools will follow. Perhaps the union will sue its own members?

In the meantime, we have learned a valuable lesson. In Denver, union board members — who aren't elected by the public — have more power over school policy than parents, teachers, elected school board members, principals, legislators and superintendents appointed by elected mayors.

For the union, that equation seems just about right. This time, though, it may have gone too far.

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DPS won't delay start of school for convention

The Denver Post

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Denver's school board voted Thursday to start school this fall on Aug. 18 rather than

delaying classes to avoid potential conflicts with the Democratic National Convention.

The convention is being held Aug. 25-28. The district conducted an online survey, in which the majority of respondents voted for the standard, earlier start.

The board voted 5-2 to start Aug. 18. The other scenario would have started school Sept. 2.

Security officials with the district and the city and county of Denver had urged the board to start school after the convention.

Rocky Mountain News

Friday, January 25, 2008

DPS won't delay start of classes

By **Nancy Mitchell** <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/>> , **Rocky Mountain News (Contact** <<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/staff/nancy-mitchell/contact/>>)

Students in Denver Public Schools will return to classes as usual in August, after school board members on Thursday vetoed a plan to delay the school start date for the Democratic National Convention.

Board members voted 5-2 to start school on Aug. 18 this fall, rather than wait until Sept 2. The DNC is scheduled to bring 35,000 visitors to Denver between Aug. 25 and 28.

Earlier this month, DPS Security Chief Ed Ray and Justin DeMello, head of the city's Office of Emergency Management, told board members that the city and district could better share resources in the event of a DNC emergency if schools were not in session.

But a survey of parents, students, teachers and community members found 57 percent preferred the earlier start. Only one group - parents - came out in favor of the later return.