

Crossing the Line: What's at Risk

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Let's take a risk here*it is* about the money.

The Washington State Senate and House were developing companion legislation addressing education reform, bills HB 1410 and SB 5444. The bills were based directly on the 18-month work of a bipartisan committee, the Basic Education Finance Joint Task Force, and sponsored by legislators on the Task Force. This legislation redesigned how K-12 schools are funded -- not just *how much* is funded to the school system, but how the funding *arrives at* a school building. Though important details still remained to be developed and documented, the intent of the legislative goals was clearly spelled out in the bills: "we believe these reforms to be best for students".

Those bills encompassed the reforms that taxpayers, employers, education professionals, teachers and parents have sought for decades. The new funding model would 1) be significantly more transparent, 2) hold the State and districts more accountable for how funding is spent, and 3) allow more efficient local use of the funding to get better results for a given school.

As such, the key component in the legislation was a new teacher compensation model, to be phased in over 10 or more years. The model is acutely focused on prioritizing teacher quality – the #1 factor clearly proven to create better student learning, and one of the best returns on investment of dollars put into education. Smaller class sizes, more time learning in the classroom, core content with integrated curriculums, and more rigorous graduation requirements are important, but no factor is more directly related to how well students learn than the quality of their teacher.

There can be many valid points of view on why and how the bills met their end, but one fact is likely undisputed by all the parties including the Governor, legislators, OSPI, SBE, and the alphabet soup of education associations and advocacy organizations – the [Washington Education Associations](#) (WEA, the teachers union) killed these reform bills.

So maybe there can be a conversation around this question – who is crossing the line in making the commitment to what is best for students?

The five state education unions formed an alliance named the [Full Funding Coalition](#) (FFC). The FFC and the individual unions opposed HB 1410 / SB 5444, with the WEA relentlessly taking lead as the most outspoken. The FFC stated publicly that their main dissents were that no source of funding was actually tied to fulfilling the reforms (a very valid concern, though also not addressed in their own final opposition bill), and that the modernized graduation requirements and other reforms are just more unfunded mandates that school districts will be held accountable for fulfilling without the many actual resources to do so (also valid concerns, but most agree is quite addressable in procedure and policy).

But perhaps the actual and unspoken reason to the WEA opposition is the proposed teacher compensation program.

The new teacher compensation program *is* an overall paradigm shift from the past decades.

The new teacher compensation model starts off by eliminating arbitrary inequities in base pay, building in a geographical cost-of-living differential, and matching base pay-scales to be competitive to other

industries. It also introduces a building-based bonus structure linked to group performance measured in student learning gains, supports intensive mentor review of teachers, encourages career progression through a ladder of professional standards, creates opportunity for differential pay per teacher specialty, and other staff-oriented reforms.

Taken collectively, along with the laser-focus by other policies building up teaching quality, these new salary models are intended to yield better teachers in every classroom while also significantly better paying them. Some teachers may not see a significant increase in their compensation -- many notable teachers and staff definitely would -- but no teacher would experience a decrease in salary.

Additionally, a proposed new database to track each student's grades, records and test scores across space and time (i.e. moving between buildings, districts and over their K-12 history), which is not done now, initiates a method to consistently measure individual student learning outcomes. Over time, this new record tracking will underwrite the congregate data to build an entire performance-based compensation program. Down the road, that per-student-data could be one component to build additional metrics to further measure individual teacher effectiveness -- a record of who are the 'good' teachers over time (though such is a long way off, if ever really attainable).

In addition to modernizing pay models and professionalizing the teaching career, nearly every other aspect of bills HB 1410 / SB 5444 were the exact qualities the ed associations and teachers have pursued for years, which also prioritize 'what's best for kids'.

Though not prohibiting or eliminating local bargaining, the new compensation model does challenge the primary foundation to union bargaining. The reforms leave substantially less depth to financial negotiations because the State will begin to pay the bulk of the share that currently goes to teachers from local funding, the local 'Maintenance & Operation' levy. Though inadequate to close the gap, and widely varying in amount amongst the 200+ local unions across WA, local levy dollars can be the bulk of negotiations that unions employ for salary dollars, particularly in the dozen-plus largest, property-rich school districts raising tens of millions of dollars.

Passing the Simple Majority initiative for local levies in 2007 was important to many school districts across the state that had repeatedly failed to provide that 12-24% of their operating budgets. The vote was an historic ballot to change back our State Constitution's 1943 requirement for raising local school operating funds to be decided by public vote with a simple majority rather than a 60% supermajority. Succeeding at Simple Majority was also important to the WEA as a growing percentage of local levy dollars were going to teacher salaries, both in hiring additional staff and increasing pay through TRI, as State-level funding continued to fall further short of the actual cost.

Through the proposed reforms, the unions (not the teachers and staff per se, but the *business of the unions*) are positioned to take a substantive decrease to the immense leverage they hold now. Union bargaining power may become less material to an individual teacher's financial career because the local union is no longer participating in adding as much monetary value (though many other important aspects of employment would be supported and influenced by the union). Nor would a handful of the largest unions be as able to exercise significant influence over other aspects of the states largest school districts.

The proposed compensation changes open a door at the brink of a slippery slope for union leadership. Relinquishing union influence over significant bulks of negotiable dollars is a hard step to take across a very wide line -- giving up the power of money *is* their big risk.

The majority of parents love and appreciate our teachers. Let's do be clear about that -- differing with a union strategy is not the same as being unsupportive of or inappropriately valuing teachers. More so, it is not that same as differing from what teachers want and deserve.

At some point, every established system is viewed to benefit from realignment with the present-day economy that surrounds it. Education staff and unions do have very valid concerns over prior broken promises, and change often has ridden on the financial backs of teachers (in part due to historical union policy itself, but the unions don't see it that way...). The union has cause, and reason to promote a perspective that looks back at the past rather than to see what is possible coming ahead (the system surrounding the current compensation model is the beast the WEA knows, they are the tamer with the biggest whip, and un-caging the beast may not only rattle the natives but the territory it could roam is unknown, nor its appetite for more).

Because there is no money to be had now or in the near future of the Washington 2009-11 biennium budget, the vast majority of education stakeholders outside of the WEA believe that now is exactly the time to reform the structure going forward to what is acutely and repeatedly demonstrated to be that which works best for students, and gets the best results for the public's investment. Purposely building additional teacher quality is core to the success of reform.

For that reason and for many of their own, numerous superintendents support the two companion reform bills, and say so publicly -- as do many administrators and teachers. Each of those speakers wish, and need, to keep day-to-day working relationships with the unions yet are willing and able to disagree without being disagreeable.

The unions should certainly continue to bear the right to exist, and to represent and perform their duties to their memberships. But it is valid to draw a clear distinction between what may be best for the union organization versus the advancements of benefit to the teachers and staff whom the union represents. When it comes to making choices in supporting what is viewed as best for students, *for my kids*, versus the business of the union, and also as separate from *my kids' teachers*, we can choose to act in the best interest of children -- their future, and our future wished for them.

Many of the legislators (if not all, from the Governor on down) advancing the principles of the reform bills rode into office largely with the near-irreplaceable support of the education unions. These public officials are not only demonstrating leadership by promoting what is best for students, they were literally banking their careers on moving ed reform forward for *everyone* involved. This is no ceremonial line in the sand for either party. The legislators are hoping that all the other education stakeholders -- parents, teachers, educator professionals, business and taxpayers -- will rise to rally in sharing the generational work required to get this monumental bill done.

If not us, it may be the next generation has to pick up this task if *they choose* to, along with the additional economic burden compounded by the delay.....

Though I too would like to believe there is intrinsic and obvious value to thoughtfully pursuing the decisions toward what we believe to be the best commitment we make for all our students, for our kids, they are still choices to be made by us. *We* have to make a decision for the students.

So, is there a line between what is believed best for most students -- the best quality teacher as reasonably possible in front of every child in every classroom -- and what is believed best for most teachers? Yes, in reality there is. There has been, and may always be, a line between the two components. And that is OK. On occasion we have to refresh our own recognition of such.

Yet strip away all the rhetoric and it comes to this -- the Basic Ed Finance Task Force, the legislators and advocates want to directly give all teachers all the pay and nearly everything compensation structure they've requested for decades, but the union won't let teachers have it *if the union can't be the vehicle to deliver it, on their own recurring terms*.

So, who is crossing the line in defining the commitment to what is best for students *or* for teachers - at what risk, for which gain, for whom?