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Unions Act In Teachers' Interests — Not Students'

Gov. Dannel P. Malloy proposed comprehensive education reforms involving teacher certification, evaluation and tenure, setting off an exciting, constructive public debate about whether and how to change the rules that govern the employment of teachers and administrators.

Reform requires that we change the way we do business. We must moderate seniority rules in favor of considering the abilities and training of teachers in making staffing decisions. We must add time to the school day and school year to increase the time teachers are engaged with students and with each other in professional dialogue. At present, however, these initiatives are often stymied by collective bargaining.

The Connecticut Education Association and American Federation of Teachers are actively involved in this public debate, as they should be. But we must recognize that the CEA and AFT are trade unions, charged by law with representing the interests of their members, not with setting public policy or implementing educational reform.

Teachers do important work, often selflessly above and beyond

expectations. And their insights into education make them critical participants in the discussion of reform proposals. The role of teacher unions, by contrast, is very different. In my 35-plus years of representing school districts, whenever boards of education have proposed additional instructional or professional time, the teachers union has demanded increased compensation for any extra work.

That is their job — to advocate for better salary and working conditions. But the interests of children are not part of that discussion. Teachers unions are not and cannot be true partners in reform. While we value their perspective, they exist to represent the interests of their members in negotiations over wages, hours and conditions of employment.

School boards are prohibited from setting working conditions unilaterally, as is the right of non-union employers. Rather, with limited exceptions (such as the length of the school day or school year), school boards must negotiate with the CEA or AFT over wages, hours and conditions of employment. Moreover, proposed changes in the school day or school year trigger “impact” negotiations over demands for

additional compensation.

Revision of the rules governing teacher evaluation and dismissal are key to reform efforts. Although the CEA and AFT purport to advocate for reform, there is a fundamental conflict of interests in such matters. In each school district, these teachers unions have legal status by virtue of their being the designated bargaining representatives of teachers.

That designation gives them the right to demand bargaining over any change in working conditions. It also imposes upon them the “duty of fair representation,” the obligation to represent bargaining unit members in grievance or dismissal situations. By law, teachers unions must represent all teachers, including the ineffective or incompetent. Their professed willingness to weed out low performers directly contradicts their legal obligation to their members.

As but one example, statutory changes were proposed last year by ConnCAN and others to change the “last in/first out” seniority rules. Somehow, the teachers unions got involved, and with little public discussion that initiative to change union rules in the interest of students morphed into a union

proposal to give union designates an equal voice with management in establishing and implementing evaluation plans.

Such a role for union representatives in evaluations would directly conflict with their duty to advocate for their affected members. Fortunately, the legislation was not adopted, but not for want of union advocacy.

In the ongoing debate over

reform, all voices should be heard. Teachers will be affected by the laws that are passed in this session. Their designated representatives are highly effective advocates who will and must argue on their behalf. But we must not forget that teachers unions are unions. In making important public policy decisions on education reform, the General Assembly must keep that truth in mind and base its decisions

on the interests of the entire school community.

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