

# Teachers Unions Are More Powerful Than You Realize—But That May Be Changing

Teachers unions throughout the US claim to be looking out for the best interests of teachers and students, but they are deeply political organizations with significant influence over what, how, where, and with whom most children learn.

While the nation's largest teachers unions have long been deeply connected to the Democratic Party and left-wing ideology, this political affiliation has become increasingly apparent in recent months. From hinging their support for reopening schools on outrageous policy demands to launching court battles, threatening strikes, and openly supporting disturbing actions during recent protests, today's teachers unions are more powerful and dangerous than many parents may realize.

Public sector unions by their nature are problematic because they are funded by taxpayers under a threat of force and often have monopoly power. Unlike private sector unions where consumers have more choice, no taxpayer can opt out of paying their portion of public sector union dues (which come from government employee salaries), including what those dues fund.

In July, the Los Angeles teachers union released a report detailing the conditions they identified for a safe reopening of schools. This document went far beyond requesting social distancing plans and personal protective equipment to an agenda that eclipsed both COVID-19 and educational matters. Specifically, it laid out policy requirements for school reopening, including passing Medicare for All at the federal level, raising state taxes, defunding the police, and imposing a moratorium on charter schools.

In Florida, the teachers union **waged** a court battle against the state's school reopening plans this fall. In New York City, the teachers union is **threatening** to strike this week over in-person school reopening plans. And in Massachusetts, teachers unions recently **succeeded** in delaying the school start date to later in September, ensuring no funding cuts, and pushing for remote-only learning in many districts.

As Corey DeAngelis of the Reason Foundation **observed**, school reopenings are closely linked to the power and influence of teachers unions in a given location—not to virus-related safety concerns. Citing mounting data on school reopening plans across the country, DeAngelis reports that the “relationship between unionization and reopening decisions remains substantively and statistically significant even after controlling for school district size and coronavirus deaths and cases per capita in the county during the month of July.”

Beyond COVID-19, teachers unions are also weighing in on the social unrest impacting major US cities. Particularly disturbing was a tweet issued last week by the Chicago Teachers Union supporting protesters who erected a guillotine outside of Amazon founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos's, house:

*We are completely frightened by, completely impressed by and completely in support of wherever this is headed. #Solidarity*  
<https://t.co/lfsQgJaD1z>

— ChicagoTeachersUnion (@CTULocal1) August 27, 2020

Contentious back-to-school plans, a heated presidential election cycle, and mounting civil strife are shining an illuminating spotlight on teachers unions and their established political affiliations. While we may think of public schools across the country as reflecting the political and ideological diversity of their local communities, the reality is that the teachers unions and their members swing hard left.

According to EducationNext, the nation's two top teachers unions have been among the leading financial contributors to national elections since 1990: "They have forged an alliance with the Democratic Party, which receives the vast majority of their hard-money campaign contributions as well as in-kind contributions for get-out-the-vote operations." Teachers union members comprise 10 percent of the delegates at the Democratic National Convention, where they represent "the single largest organizational bloc of Democratic Party activists."

Fortunately, the 2018 US Supreme Court's *Janus* decision freed non-members of public sector unions from being forced to contribute union dues, allowing government employees to avoid supporting political organizations and platforms with which they may disagree. Despite this win, the influence of teachers unions on progressive policy across the country continues unabated. In fact, the National Education Association, the nation's largest public sector union and the largest teachers union, reported that both dues and membership increased a year after the *Janus* decision.

At their July convention, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the nation's second-largest teachers union, voted almost unanimously to endorse Joe Biden's presidential bid. In her convention speech, AFT president Randi Weingarten made no secret of the far-left policies and politics her union and its members endorse. She said:

*Imagine a world with: universal pre-K; debt forgiveness for educators; triple Title I funding; expanded community schools; supports for kids*

*with special needs; high-stakes testing thrown out the window; charter school accountability; public colleges and universities tuition-free for families who earn less than \$125,000.*

*That's not from an AFT resolution. That's straight from the Democratic Party platform, born out of the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force recommendations we helped draft.*

Additionally, the AFT endorsed other progressive policies at their convention that are unrelated to education, such as the Green New Deal, affordable housing, and universal healthcare. For many of the parents of the nearly 50 million K-12 public school students in the US, these policies likely go against their personal and political beliefs and they should be concerned that this leftist ideology is creeping into their child's classroom.

This seems to already be occurring in California. State lawmakers have paved the way for the country's first mandatory ethnic studies graduation requirement, a move that is actively embraced by the California Teachers Union. *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board wrote Sunday about California's planned curriculum mandate: "This is ugly stuff, a force-feeding to teenagers of the anti-liberal theories that have been percolating in campus critical studies departments for decades. Enforced identity politics and 'intersectionality' are on their way to replacing civic nationalism as America's creed."

Parents and taxpayers should also be concerned if teachers unions had overwhelmingly right-wing ideas and influence as well, which is why limiting the overall power of public sector unions is so crucial.

While COVID-19 has caused major disruptions in how we live and learn, it has also empowered parents to look more closely at their children's education. As more families choose independent homeschooling and learning pods this fall, education is becoming more decentralized and family-centered. A recent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed speculated that this education trend is likely to strike teachers unions hard: "What happens when they refuse to do their jobs and it turns out home-schoolers are better at it anyway?"

Education choice and innovation during the pandemic will loosen the clutch of the powerful teachers unions and their progressive agenda. Despite some schools and teachers trying to push parents away from observing their child's instruction, more parents are waking up to what their children are learning in school and realizing that, in many cases, it may run counter to their own values. A vocally progressive agenda and broad Democratic Party allegiance by powerful teachers unions, combined with the proliferation of more schooling alternatives resulting from the pandemic, may prompt more parents to opt out of their

local district school for other options.

The pandemic is set to weaken the long-held grip of teachers unions on US education and social policy, and strengthen educational diversity and choice for more families. It may also prompt a closer look at the outsized influence of public sector unions more generally. Taxpayers should know what they are paying for.