

PUBLIC OPINION GOES AGAINST TEACHERS UNION

Thursday, December 2, 2004
ELIZABETH HOVDE
Columbian staff writer

The Washington Education Association's definition of success appears to be as strange as its definition of fair. Someone get the union's leaders a dictionary, asap.

A Nov. 11 press release from the union said, "WEA members celebrate election success on Saturday." It goes on to say that the union's 77,000 members (public educators in this state are forced to pay dues to the WEA if they want to teach here) helped elect "strong, pro-public education leaders and defeat charter schools." In addition to the charter school legislation's defeat, the union cited victories in six of seven "priority races" in the Legislature as part of its election contributions.

What the WEA press release failed to mention was that several, make that many, of its election dreams did not come true on Nov. 2, despite the union's vast spending.

Take the races that the union felt important enough to lobby for on the front cover of its organizational newsletter WE a publication paid for by those 77,000 members who mandatorily pay union dues, enabling WEA to fund its aggressive politicking. The newsletter that hit educators' homes (including mine) just days before the election said, "Our Students Need Your Vote." Above that was an illustration of a ballot surrounded by kids and showing votes for the following six races: Christine Gregoire for governor, John Kerry for president, Judith Billings for state schools superintendent, Deborah Senn for attorney general, approval of Initiative 884 (a sales tax increase for more educational offerings) and rejection of Referendum 55 (charter schools). **If success is one out of six races, the WEA is champion of the universe. But of those front-cover races, only Ref. 55 went the union's way.**

In that same election issue of WE, the union "took to the streets, so to speak, to ask some of you (its members) what you think is the most important issue on the ballot affecting public education." As usual, leading its members to believe there isn't a conservative or Republican in its fold, the WEA just happened to find those members who echoed the union's political opinions. These man-on-the-street pontifications, which were represented as random, expressed support for Kerry, Gregoire and I-884, while showing disdain for public charter schools and incumbent schools superintendent Terry Bergeson. Imagine that.

What really got some teachers thinking, I hope, was the union's endorsements in state legislative races. Of 47 state House and Senate races, guess how many Democrats were endorsed and how many Republicans: 46 Democrats, 1 Republican. Tony Moore, that lone Republican endorsed for District 30, was vice president of Citizens for Federal Way

Schools. He lost, but the WEA shouldn't lose sleep. The winner was Democrat Mark Miloscia, who also had the backing of labor groups.

In Clark County, the WEA lost all but one of five legislative races it gave an endorsement in: Craig Pridemore beat incumbent Sen. Don Carlson, who I think has been one of the state's most pro-education lawmakers. As a retired teacher, he was certainly one of the best informed, and he was a leader on both the Senate Education and Higher Education Committees. But because Carlson actually thought teaching was a good, fulfilling line of work, and because he recognized the limitations of a state budget in recession, he was on the WEA chopping block along with other moderates.

WEA creates another world for members

The WEA's press release marking "election success" (and failing to mention numerous defeats or how much money WEA members spent on the election) is consistent with its year-round efforts to convince its members of a false reality. In the union's world, all educators are Democrats, all Democrats are pro-education and all Republicans are, by default, anti-education. Let's hope WEA members are diligent enough to educate themselves about who represents us rather than taking the union's word for it.

And maybe someday, these educators will lobby those government leaders to free them from the hundreds of dollars they're forced to pay this union each year to contort the truth and dabble in politics with which many members disagree.

Did you know?

According to the state Public Disclosure Commission, the WEA and its political action committee (WEA PAC) contributed a total of \$1,274,737 in the state's 2004 election. This amount does not reflect what WEA spends internally on political efforts.

WEA alone, not the PAC, gave \$652,755 to two statewide ballot measures, making the union the eighth top contributor to 2004 ballot measures. (The majority of that money went to reject Ref. 55.)

The National Education Association, WEA's parent organization, came in at 10th place on the top contributors to Washington state's ballot measures for 2004. It gave \$500,000.

http://www.columbian.com/12022004/clark_co/218055.html

Elizabeth Hovde's column of personal opinion appears on the Other Opinions page each Thursday. Her e-mail address: elizabeth.hovde@columbian.com.