

## Nonunion Teacher Groups Cost NEA Membership and Clout

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This fall the Democratic Party will again be counting heavily on the money and grassroots organizing of the National Education Association. But if the Democrats are taking the NEA's power for granted, they haven't reckoned with people like Betsy Rogers.

The day after being named Alabama's first "National Teacher of the Year" in 2003, Mrs. Rogers received a supplicant in her Washington hotel room.

Kathy McVay, then-president of the Alabama affiliate of the National Education Association, urged the honoree to show solidarity with her colleagues by rejoining the union, which she had quit 15 years before. "I caved," Mrs. Rogers says -- but then she let the membership lapse. Complaining that the NEA in Alabama is preoccupied with politics and resists educational innovation, she has joined a fledgling alternative: the nonunion Alabama Conference of Educators, which started in 2001 and now has nearly 1,000 members.

The rise of nonunion teacher associations is helping erode the longstanding clout of the NEA, the nation's biggest union, with 2.7 million members. Rival nonunion groups have amassed at least 250,000 predominantly rural and suburban members in 18 states -- including recent start-ups in Washington state, Arkansas, Alabama and Virginia -- by offering lower dues, a less-confrontational attitude toward school boards and fewer social pronouncements than the NEA. Now, after years of growth, NEA

membership and revenue are leveling off, and younger teachers are less inclined than older teachers to agree with union positions.

The NEA's travails have broad significance for education in the U.S. The union has used its clout to increase education spending and shrink class sizes. But it has also defended the status quo, fighting measures to hold teachers accountable for student test scores and to offer parents more choices in their children's schooling.



Any weakness in the union would also have big political ripples. One of the Democratic Party's staunchest allies, the NEA has a substantial presence at this week's Democratic Convention. About 6% of delegates and alternates are NEA members.

NEA membership growth started to flatten three years ago. In 2002-03, membership declined from the prior year in 20 states. Nationwide, membership among teachers and other school personnel -- excluding members such as students and retirees, who pay much less in dues -- increased 9,262, or 0.4%. For 2003-2004, the union again anticipates growth of less than 1%.

NEA President Reg Weaver acknowledges that membership numbers have plateaued, attributing the stagnation to teacher layoffs prompted by state and local budget cuts. "That's the reason we're going on an organizing campaign," he says.

Anxiety over membership and revenue pervaded the NEA's annual convention in Washington this month, where the union saved \$310,000 by canceling a pop-music concert event, a "men's issues meeting" and hosting of foreign trade unionists. Although the NEA's projected budget ramps up membership organizing by \$2 million, that wasn't enough for the past president of Georgia's NEA affiliate, who pleaded for help in rebuffing a nonunion competitor.

"Our competing organization now says they have 57,000 members," Ralph Noble told the NEA delegates. "The first time I came to this mic to raise this issue" -- in 1992 -- "they said they had 37,000 members."

The nonunion associations are staked in part by conservative foundations that also support taxpayer-funded vouchers for private-school students and charter schools operated independently of traditional school-district supervision. These associations oppose collective bargaining on the grounds that it polarizes administrators and teachers who need to work together for schoolchildren.

"I really feel like we need this independent organization in our state," says Mrs. Rogers. Although the NEA affiliate in Alabama "has been very active in protecting the rights of teachers," she adds, "it hasn't always acted in the best interests of the child. It's been in control of

education for over 30 years in this state, and we're at the bottom of the heap."

Mrs. McVay of the NEA affiliate plays down the significance of Mrs. Rogers's defection. She noted that Mrs. Rogers is also a member of the American Federation of Teachers, the country's second-biggest teachers' union.

In Texas, Missouri, Georgia and perhaps Mississippi, nonunion association members now outnumber those in the NEA. As nonunion competitors swelled, NEA membership between 1995 and 2003 shrank 20.8% in Mississippi and 26.8% in Texas. E.C. Walker, executive director of the NEA affiliate in Texas, says membership is starting to rebound.

The NEA is also facing pressure from the Bush administration. The Labor Department and the Internal Revenue Service are investigating the union for allegedly failing to report political spending, which is taxable. The NEA says it spends dues only to communicate with its members, which is legal and nontaxable, and not with the general public.

The breach between the administration and the union widened this past February when U.S. Secretary of Education Roderick Paige termed the NEA a "terrorist organization" for what he regarded as its efforts to obstruct the administration's 2001 "No Child Left Behind" law. The NEA wants to change the law -- which requires schools to meet test-score targets or face a variety of penalties -- to allow alternative ways of evaluating schools, such as changes in dropout and absentee rates or having teams of specialists accredit schools.

In response to such attacks, Mr. Weaver says, the NEA's strategy is, "Don't get mad, just do what needs to be done." Following that dictum, the union's governmental-relations office sent field staff into battleground states in January, rather than waiting until Labor Day as in prior presidential campaigns.

In addition to raising an expected \$7.2 million in member donations to its political action

committee for federal candidates in this election cycle, the NEA has established a spinoff, Communities for Quality Education, and given it nearly \$6 million. CQE is running television ads attacking the "No Child Left Behind" law, which the union believes unfairly makes scapegoats of struggling schools. The ads are running in Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Arizona and Nevada -- states that contain districts of key members of Congress on education issues.

In part, the NEA is a victim of its own success. It won the loyalty of the generation of teachers now reaching retirement age, most of whom were hired when the baby-boom generation was in school, by negotiating major run-ups in salaries and benefits in the 1960s and early 1970s. The newcomers haven't seen such increases, and aren't likely to soon.

Instead, they're saddled with mounting dues. To deal with budget crunches and investment losses, NEA's Illinois affiliate boosted annual dues for 2004-05 by \$39, to \$365, while Michigan raised them \$111.90 in 2003-04 and \$13.40 in the coming year, to \$582.70. Neither total includes next year's national dues of \$137, up slightly from this year.

In states with strong labor movements and collective-bargaining laws for public employees, teachers have little alternative to union membership. If they don't join a union and pay it dues, they still must pay the union what are known as "agency fees" for services. But in 20 or so states without collective-bargaining laws for public workers, where state legislatures or local school boards typically set salaries, teachers increasingly have the option of joining nonunion professional associations.

These groups echo the origins of the NEA, which served as a professional association for more than a century before morphing into a union in the 1960s. Like the NEA, the nonunion associations provide liability insurance and other benefits and a modicum of teacher training, and they lobby state legislatures for more education spending. But the associations have lower state dues than the union, and no required national fee.

Union officials say they provide better services than the nonunion groups, whom they accuse of piggybacking on the NEA's successes. "Some teachers in the state feel they get all the benefits we lobby for even if they aren't members," such as lower health-care premiums, says Peggy Mobley, who succeeded Mrs. McVay as president of the NEA affiliate in Alabama.

One selling point of these associations has been their refusal to endorse candidates or take positions on noneducational issues -- in contrast to the NEA. Besides backing Sen. John Kerry and other candidates -- more than 90% of them Democrats -- the NEA favors a single-payer national-health-insurance plan, legislative consideration of reparations to African-Americans for slavery and "reproductive freedom without governmental intervention." It's against enshrining English as the country's official language and drug testing without probable cause.

"The NEA seems radical in everything, pushy, aggressive, and not in a positive way," says Linda Schnakenberg, president-elect of the nonunion Missouri State Teachers Association and a high-school English teacher. "I don't think a teachers' organization has any business being involved in issues like birth control and gun control."

Foundations alienated by the NEA's political agenda have helped underwrite the nonunion movement. The Jaquelin Hume Foundation in San Francisco, which funds school choice initiatives, gave \$200,000 this year to the Association of American Educators, which represents 11 of the nonunion state associations.

"We think the teachers' unions have become so politicized they don't really do what they're supposed to," says Gisele Huff, the foundation's executive director. Other major funders of the national association include the John M. Olin Foundation and Walton Family Foundation, funded by the late founder of Wal-Mart Stores Inc.

Yet nonunion associations are becoming political too. Through its political action committee, the 100,000-member Association of Texas Professional Educators helps retire campaign debt of friendly legislators and also donates to the governor, lieutenant governor and other statewide officeholders as a "goodwill gesture," according to director Doug Rogers.

Despite a mission statement proclaiming that it "does not participate in the campaign of any candidate or political party," the Kentucky Association of Professional Educators last fall endorsed Ernie Fletcher, the victorious Republican candidate for governor. The NEA affiliate there backed his Democratic opponent, Ben Chandler. Ruth Green, executive director of the 1,180-member Kentucky association, says members broke with tradition because they were outraged by a scandal involving alleged abuse of power by then-governor Paul Patton, a Democrat.

Endorsements "aren't something that most of the independent groups would feel comfortable with," says Gary Beckner, director of the Association of American Educators, the nonunion umbrella group. "But it might just be the nature of the game, the bigger you get." The AEA is moving to larger offices in Washington and seeking greater visibility through "advertorials" and surveys.

Of all the nonunion groups, the Missouri State Teachers Association is the most politically prominent. The MSTA split from the NEA in 1972 and has boosted membership to 41,000 from 28,000 in 1989. Today, it boasts more members and a bigger war chest for state legislative races than the state's NEA affiliate.

The MSTA eschewed politics until 1999, when it mobilized its members against a union-backed bill in the state legislature allowing collective bargaining for public employees. The bill would

have forced the MSTA to either change its philosophy and become a bargaining agent, or be relegated to a peripheral role. That's because the NEA affiliate in most districts would have been empowered under the law to bargain for all teachers, including MSTA members.

Inundated with calls and letters from MSTA members, the Missouri House defeated the bill, 88-73. Soon after that vote, the MSTA began rewarding legislative allies with PAC funds. In 2000, it endorsed candidates for the state legislature for the first time.

Since then, the MSTA, which doesn't back candidates for statewide or federal office, has endorsed about the same number of Democrats and Republicans. In 2002, according to the association, there were 41 legislative races in which the association and the NEA supported different people. Of those, the MSTA candidate won 37.

At the MSTA's behest, State Rep. Jim Seigfreid opposed the collective-bargaining bill. Now in a primary race for a state Senate seat, the conservative Democrat is reaping the benefits of that vote -- including the association's coveted endorsement and its \$600 campaign contribution, the maximum allowed. The MSTA also arranged an event at a golf club where Rep. Seigfreid mingled with teachers and placed an ad supporting his candidacy in 21 newspapers.

The NEA is backing Page Bellamy, a county prosecutor, against Rep. Seigfreid in the primary next Tuesday. While grateful for union support, Mr. Bellamy acknowledges the MSTA's clout in the district. "I would sure hope to get its endorsement in the general election," he says.

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