



Teacher Associations for Today

July 6, 2016

Ric Bayless, President, Mansfield Professional Educators

<https://www.wenatcheeworld.com/news/2016/jul/06/ric-bayless-teacher-associations-for-today/>

MANSFIELD – Professional educators should be part of guiding local schools. Employees should have a system that addresses bargaining in an agreeable manner and have a workplace advocate who can address the friction that occasionally arises in any workplace.

For 50 years, most school employees have been required, as a condition of employment, to join the state and national teacher unions that we know today. The National Education association and American Federation of Teachers have more than 4.5 million members and the Washington Education Association (WEA) controls the contracts in more than 200 school districts across Washington state. Yet current educators have never had the opportunity to vote on which union represents them.

As a centralized bureaucracy, teacher unions take a lock-step approach toward policy and professional issues. Conflict between administration and teachers, rigid bargaining and the omnipresent threat of walkouts and strikes does not meet the needs of all communities. In small towns and rural districts, members of the bargaining committee might actually sit down together to family dinner or take their children to the same scout group.

In Mansfield, the WEA was not supported and only a few of the teachers in the district were members. The politics of the WEA were disconcerting to some. Because only two employees were members of the WEA, those two teachers had the sole power to bargain the union contract for everyone.

We learned that Sprague, St. John and Waterville teachers successfully exercised their rights to form a teacher representation association that better met their needs and community values. We wanted to do the same. We felt that our small town community did not match the tone and expectations of the state union. Workplace representation from the large organization's perspective was less sensitive to the necessary ongoing community relationships.

The teachers in Mansfield met in September 2013 and agreed to form a nonprofit, professional association to serve as the voice of the Mansfield teachers. We wanted our dues to be affordable and to not be funneled into political organizations and causes which were objected to by our teachers.

By June 2014, Mansfield became one of four districts in Washington to create a Local Independent Teacher Association (LITA) that would allow administration, board members and teachers to work together to mutually advance the interests of students and the professionalism of educators. This move toward professional autonomy for teachers is being repeated across the nation.

The process to replace the WEA and NEA with a Local Independent Teacher Association was remarkably easy. Support was unanimous and it only took a few hours to organize.

One surprising benefit of our decision was the astonishing cost savings. Previously, Mansfield educators were each sending \$769 per year to organizations outside of Mansfield. Now we charge ourselves only what our local workplace services actually cost. Our savings not only benefit our families and local businesses, but we are able to obtain supplemental professional services such as professional liability insurance from another home-grown professional organization: Northwest Professional Educators. We also get to make our own decisions about politics, causes and charitable efforts rather than having those decisions made by people in Federal Way or in Washington DC.

Local control, customized workplace representation and direction over our profession is the future of the more nimble, decentralized teacher association. We are living it here in Mansfield.