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Collective bargaining doesn't help schools

By Karen Helland

Education reform will once again be a hot topic in the election this fall, with possible initiatives on charter schools, education funding and teacher pay. But the discussion will probably continue to ignore one of the most important driving factors in education: collective bargaining.

Collective bargaining is the process by which teachers' unions and school boards determine what goes on in schools: how money is spent, who teaches where, how large classes are, sometimes even what is taught. Too often this process has ignored students and left excellent teachers and administrators frustrated.

Unfortunately, the current collective bargaining model in our public schools is based on the industrial model of employer-employee relationships. Management — the school board and administration — is prevented from having discretion over raising pay, assigning work

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or firing employees. All employees must financially support the union; no employer can deal directly with the employee. Strikes are sometimes used to resolve disputes in a public relations war that ignores the needs of students and parents.

In many ways, this model is an uneasy fit in public schools. Teachers are not interchangeable units, as any parent knows. A teacher's dedication, creativity and love for students are far more important factors in motivating a child to learn than how long that teacher has been on the job.

But collective bargaining and the state laws reinforcing it mean that good teachers gain no more financial recognition than poor ones do. No wonder teachers are frustrated about the lack of competitive salaries.

Collective bargaining also threatens local control of school districts. It means that a private entity — the union — controls what elected school board officials can do. Contracts govern how the vast majority of funds in a school district must be spent, leaving the school board with little discretion when faced with a budget crunch.

Contracts are required to cover many big-ticket items like salaries and benefits. Their influence over school district

finances can be made unnecessarily broader. For example, the Vancouver School District's contract contains pages of details on how the district must be administered. It takes 13 pages to tell how personnel assignments can be made and six pages to tell how teachers can be selected for layoff and recall. Money spent on these complex procedures is money not being spent on students.

One other vital factor makes collective bargaining in public schools a threat to local control: School boards are elected. The union that gets a "no" from a school board member can campaign against that member next fall. No other unions have this much direct power to remove management.

The most serious consequence of current collective bargaining model in public schools, though, is the way it too often ignores the interests of students. Neither teachers, principals nor school boards can innovate changes helpful to students if those changes would violate the terms of a contract.

Qualifications vs. seniority

That said, even within the current collective bargaining system, informed school board members can make posi-

itive changes. One way is to eliminate seniority as the primary consideration in transfer and layoff. When a principal decides how to fill a vacancy at a school, he or she should be able to choose the teacher who can best do the job. Many contracts instead require seniority to be the first or only consideration.

The Vancouver contract states that the union "reluctantly" acknowledges that qualifications are more important than seniority, but only in certain situations. Qualifications should always be more important than simply being around the longest. Even where the contract allows a principal to consider education and experience, the principal is not allowed to look at the teacher's capability to do the job. Decisions about who works where should be made based on which teacher is best for the students, not on which one has been around the longest.

Until now, little attention has been given to the influence collective bargaining has on the education of students and the empowerment of individual teachers and school boards. It's time for that to change.

Education is not about who wins in a contest between the school board and the union; it's about delivering the best education for students.

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