

The time has come for Alabama to hold bad teachers accountable

Why is the Alabama Education Association afraid of a little accountability?

There's no other way to explain the teachers union's opposition all session long to House Bill 831, which would restore to local school boards the authority to dismiss tenured teachers without having each individual decision reviewed by labor arbitrators (typically from out of state).

It wasn't always this way. The law used to uphold the autonomy of school boards to fire a problem teacher. But in 2004, the Legislature passed a bill - at the AEA's urging - that installed arbitrators over school boards to hear appeals from any teacher with tenure. And every teacher, no matter how borderline, is awarded tenure after three years.

Horror stories: To the surprise of practically no one, union-shielded teachers have racked up enough horror stories that lawmakers should revisit the 2004 decision.

In Mobile County, for example, the school board attempted to fire Marion Dunn, a science teacher and basketball coach who was caught on camera ordering his players to physically assault one of their teammates. One player testified he broke his hand after Dunn ordered him into another fight.

The arbitrator ordered Dunn's termination reduced to a 30-day unpaid suspension. The school board balked at the order and was forced to pay Dunn more than \$82,000

over two years to stay out of the classroom. After the board had exhausted its appeals, the union attorney chided school board members for not just letting Dunn back into the classroom.

In southern Alabama, a school board fired a teacher for helping students cheat on a standardized test. His union-supported appeal to an arbitrator reduced the penalty to an 18-month suspension.

If school boards can't permanently get rid of tenured teachers who teach beating or cheating, what hope do they have for getting rid of teachers who are just lousy?

There's no good reason to protect teachers from accountability for their behavior, no matter what their union says. And as it turns out, what the union says is pretty weak.

The AEA's complaint about the old Tenure Commission (which the AEA got abolished in 2004) was that it ruled in favor of upholding school boards' decisions four out of every five times. This makes about as much sense as the complaint that our courts must be broken because alleged criminals are usually found guilty.

The union also says teachers should not be accountable to bad administrators. But the system put in place at the AEA's urging shields administrators from accountability as well, virtually guaranteeing that the smell of some bad eggs will linger in our children's schools. One

principal was discovered to have diverted school money into his own personal slush fund; covered under the tenure law, he continued to receive pay for two years before facing criminal charges.

As it stands, the union would rather have a system that keeps accountability low for everyone than one that raises the bar for teachers and principals alike.

But the AEA doesn't simply fight to save teachers and administrators from accountability to parents and students; it also fights to avoid accountability to its own members. The AEA has taken the lead among teachers unions in a legal fight against the U.S. Department of Labor, which is asking that the AEA and its fellows be held to the same transparency standard as private-sector unions. Right now, individual teachers have no way to find out how their state and local unions (like the AEA) are spending the dues money taken from their paychecks.

To sum up: The AEA doesn't want teachers to be accountable to parents, and it doesn't want to be accountable to its members. It's time for lawmakers to hold these union bosses—and bad teachers—accountable to everyone.

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