

## My View: Unions: Be part of education reform or be left behind

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**By Casey Patterson**

Lost somewhere between the two extremes are the voices of effective, reform-minded teachers committed to school improvement. They recognize that settling for the status quo is unacceptable, when too many students are not achieving academic excellence. And many of these teachers believe neither union nor district leaders represent their perspectives.

As a result, their energy and expertise remain untapped resources and, eventually, these talented educators succumb to frustration and disillusionment, and leave the profession altogether.

Effective teachers who are achieving results with even the most challenging students read the headlines and feel personally attacked by the assault on their profession. At the same time, many of them quietly cringe at the knowledge that too many of their colleagues are not up to par. Every day, good teachers are demoralized by colleagues who enjoy job security, regardless of their performance.

And when budget shortfalls force school districts to lay off teachers, we all shake our heads in disbelief as effective and dedicated educators with low seniority receive layoff notices.

I have the good fortune of being able to view the reform debate from many angles. For the first 11 years of my career, I worked as a middle school teacher near Indianapolis. In 2004, I left classroom teaching to work full-time for the Indiana State Teachers Association, and now I am executive director of Teach Plus-Indianapolis, a nonprofit organization focused on retaining the most effective teachers in urban classrooms where students need them the most.

We need to work with teachers, unions and administrators to find the solutions that are best for students. I am troubled by the fact that unions place very little value on classroom excellence. Whether a teacher achieved success with students matters little compared with years of service.

In fact, I worked for an organization that allowed layoff of its youngest dues-paying member, regardless of her performance in the classroom, in order to keep those at the top of the pay scale employed. I was told this was the only fair way to handle layoffs, but nothing about this system seems fair to me.

I'm equally troubled to see some policy makers argue that collective bargaining rights should be stripped from teachers. Collective bargaining brings teachers and administrators to a table to reach mutual agreement on policy issues and fair salaries and benefits for teachers.

It pains me and many other teachers to see the leaders of most teachers unions unwilling to budge on the reforms so desperately needed in our schools, and conversely, to see policy makers suggest teachers don't care about their students because they engage in collective bargaining for better wages.

From teacher evaluation to compensation reform, far too many important reforms and too much time are being lost rather than reaching compromise. There are rare exceptions, of course -- pioneers in places like Denver and Pittsburgh who recognize that in order to remain relevant, our systems must adapt with the times. They understand that the public education system will be transformed, with or without unions at the table.

Union leaders have a clear and urgent choice: become part of the solution or be left behind. The latter would be a great disservice to the educators who understand teaching and learning better than anyone else. The voice of teachers must be heard in these historic, high-stakes debates.

We are counting on our unions to champion their most effective members and, above all, the children we were hired to teach.

*Patterson is executive director of Teach Plus-Indianapolis.*