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Obama & the Teachers' Unions

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 6, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The Times has an interesting article [1]this morning on the tensions between the Obama administration and the teachers? unions, exemplified by the fact that no administration officials were invited to address the unions? national conventions this year for fear they would be heckled. The tension is well earned on both sides and it speaks well of the administration.

Here in DC, we are experiencing a truly radical upheaval of the public school system, with Schools? Chancellor Michelle Rhee taking on such hallowed institutions as tenure in her effort to turn around the city?s failing schools. The DC schools were so bad that the local unions actually had to climb on board the Rhee train or fear getting sidelined entirely as the reforms were enacted. The Obama administration was not directly involved in the local effort, but its Department of Education has green-lighted many similar reforms nationwide that the unions oppose.

Sadly, the Obama administration did nothing to save on reform effort that greatly deserved saving, the DC ?Opportunity Scholarship? program that gave tuition subsidies to poor families whose public schools were broken but who could not afford private and parochial schools in their neighborhoods. I am not in favor of federal aid to private and parochial schools unless the public schools have failed so terribly that families are unable to secure a good education for their children. Long-term reforms are needed, but in the meantime, programs like the Opportunity Scholarships should be permitted in the interim. There is no reason to punish today?s children while we work hard to help tomorrow?s.

I am a product of the public schools and my mother was a lifelong member of the National Education Association, the largest teachers? union. I have no essential hostility to the unions nor do I blame them for the mess our public schools have become. Many good teachers work hard on behalf of their students against overwhelming odds. That said, if the unions obstruct reforms, the administration is right to roll over them. Too many schools are failing miserably. The molds must be broken. No one can tell what will come next, but it can scarcely be worse. The ?tension? between the administration and the unions is not an entirely bad thing and both sides should work to turn it into the kind of creative tension that will be about the most important job at hand: fixing the public schools.

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[1] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/education/05teachers.html?_r=1&hpw