

## Unions' Tactics Diverge in Engaging Obama Agenda

By Stephen Sawchuk

Forced into an uneasy balancing act between their members and the president they helped elect, the national teachers' unions are responding to the Obama administration's teacher-effectiveness agenda in notably different ways.

Publicly at least, National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel has hewed closely to the union's internal policy statements on such matters as embedding student learning into policies on teacher evaluation and pay. But the heads of the 3.2 million-member NEA's state affiliates have taken sundry positions on initiatives such as the federal Race to the Top competition, with some participating in their states' bids for the \$4 billion initiative and others opposing them outright.

In contrast, the president of the 1.5 million-member American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, has laid out—and helped local affiliates adopt—an explicit agenda for her union that, for example, endorses a new approach to teacher evaluations, including the consideration of test scores alongside other factors.

Those responses, say experts on teachers' unions, are a complex product molded significantly by the unions' respective governance structures. Among other differences, the structures make the national bully pulpit a more powerful place at the AFT, but tilt NEA policy away from its president and toward its state affiliates.

"Philosophically, I don't think [the unions' leaders] are coming from different places, but there is a difference in the extent to which they've engaged in controversial discussions about evaluation and teacher pay," said Mark Simon, who served as a member of the NEA's board of directors while the president of its Montgomery County, Md., chapter. "The politics of the organizations allow Randi to be engaged right now, ... while NEA is providing support on an affiliate-by-affiliate basis, but is not able to articulate a message for every affiliate."

**'No Confidence'**

After eight years of being largely shut out of policy discussions during President George W. Bush's administration, the teachers' unions had hoped for a president friendlier to their views on the teaching profession. And while they've had more access to President Barack Obama's administration, its focus on the controversial area of teacher performance has yielded some angry rank-and-file members.

The differences in the unions' responses were on stark display at their conventions, both held last month.

Reforming teacher evaluations is arguably the centerpiece of the administration's teacher-effectiveness conversation. But discussion of the issue was virtually absent at the NEA's Representative Assembly in New Orleans.

Instead, delegates narrowly approved a position of "no confidence" in the Race to the Top competition, which puts a premium on changing teacher evaluation. The vote largely broke along state-affiliation lines.

"The debate, the closeness of the vote—what you saw was a microcosm of experiences all over the map in terms of negative or positive experiences different states had with the program," said Ken Swanson, the president of the Illinois Education Association.

The teacher-effectiveness discussion has been pursued individually by select NEA state affiliates rather than at the national level. Unions in Delaware, Illinois, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Tennessee played a major role in the crafting of their states' applications for the Race to the Top, while other states opposed the grant program altogether.

"We are dead set against tying evaluations to teacher performance and salary," said David Sanchez, the president of the California Teachers Association. "In my opinion, we are never going to agree to consider that your salary is based on a single evaluative assessment."

In contrast, Illinois chose to move forward when state lawmakers intentionally included in an education reform bill policies reflecting some of the union's internal priorities, Mr. Swanson said.

Political realities influenced the Tennessee union's participation, said Earl Wiman, the past president of the Tennessee Education Association. "We saw the legislative call sheets, and

this became a runaway freight train," he said about a state law passed to position the state to compete in the Race to the Top program.

Rather than oppose the legislation, the union worked to reduce the percentage of a teacher's evaluation based on test-score growth and to add provisions to the state code allowing teachers to "grieve," or formally protest, procedural aspects of their evaluations, Mr. Wiman said.

The NEA did not respond to requests for an interview with Mr. Van Roekel.

### **Evaluation Endorsed**

If evaluation was on the periphery of the NEA assembly, it was front and center at the AFT's biennial convention, held in Seattle. There, AFT delegates formally endorsed a six-page, single-spaced resolution on teacher evaluation codifying the vision Ms. Weingarten had laid out in a speech six months earlier.

In that address at the National Press Club, in Washington, Ms. Weingarten said that under certain circumstances, unions could consider using student achievement in teacher evaluations and align due process procedures with such evaluations. The NEA does not endorse those policies.

Since then, Ms. Weingarten has provided crucial bargaining help to local affiliates willing to experiment with evaluation or pay, resulting in a number of high-profile contracts in such cities as New Haven, Conn.; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; and Washington.

"While the conversation about teacher evaluation may have been started by others, AFT is trying to assert our expertise and authority into that conversation," said Mary Cathryn Ricker, the president of the union's St. Paul, Minn., chapter and one of the local leaders Ms. Weingarten tapped to craft the teacher-evaluation framework.

### **Proportional Representation**

The two national unions' responses to the teacher-effectiveness issue are not recent phenomena. Rather, they reflect long-standing differences in how the unions are organized.

Under the NEA's structure, the largest state affiliates—California, New Jersey, Michigan, and Florida, among others—have the most representatives on the union's board of directors and

its resolutions committee, which vets changes to formal NEA policy statements, as well as the most delegates to its convention.

As such, they exert a powerful influence over the national union's policy direction. The NEA's resolutions are binding, and the union's president must abide by them. State affiliates, in theory, must do so to tap their share of centrally allocated NEA funding.

Before this year's convention, the union's resolutions committee discussed amending its formal position on teacher evaluations, but it did not advance anything to the delegates, according to the NEA's executive director, John I. Wilson. And doing so on a controversial issue like teacher evaluations is no easy task.

"To get a resolution to the floor, you really need strong support," said Keith B. Geiger, the union's president from 1989 to 1996. "California, New Jersey, Florida—those are states with a lot of resolutions-committee members and ... would be more reticent to pass anything that smells of merit pay, of single tests determining something."

A downside of the system is that it tethers the national leadership to the traditional positions held by those states, said Julia Koppich, a San Francisco-based consultant who has written extensively on teachers' unions.

"The organization is split, and it is predictable which states favor some change and which ones don't," she said. "If, in fact, the national NEA is more aligned with [the Illinois] positions, it should be out there working with some state affiliates to help them see if they can move a little more toward those positions."

That the largest 10 affiliates have significant control over policy has complicated Mr. Van Roekel's relationship with the Obama administration, acknowledged Mr. Sanchez, the president of the California union.

"He is in a very tough situation," Mr. Sanchez said. "But when he is directed by his board and state presidents, he's got to go [to the administration] and tell it like it is. It's challenging for him, just as it is for me to tell him that CTA is not on board with something."

### **Singular Opposition**

If the NEA structure gives state affiliates the primary role in developing and overseeing policy among local unions, an inverse situation exists within the AFT, where the central leadership actively works to persuade locals to try out new ideas.

The national AFT “treats local leaders as incubators of promising education practices, and they are constantly scanning for things locals are doing that should be scaled up,” said Ms. Ricker, who has worked within both unions’ structures because Minnesota is a merged NEA-AFT affiliate.

That ethos has given Ms. Weingarten an advantage in setting an agenda that goes against some traditionally held views, according to Ms. Koppich. “I think AFTs philosophy is quite different from the NEA’s, that it’s the elected leadership’s job to maybe take the members to some places they didn’t know they wanted to go,” she said.

What’s more, Ms. Weingarten exerts considerable influence over the union’s policy landscape partly because many of its vice presidents and resolution-vetting committee members belong to the same internal political coalition she supports, the Progressive Caucus. The group is particularly powerful in New York City, the home of the union’s largest affiliate.

It is, in fact, so rare for the AFT’s Progressive Caucus-dominated leadership to be challenged in elections that this year’s convention marked the first time since 1974 that a full opposition slate of candidates ran for office. The slate, which called itself “By Any Means Necessary,” or BAMN, criticized current AFT leaders for considering policy developments such as the Race to the Top competition and teacher evaluations tied in part to student achievement rather than opposing them altogether. It won about 5 percent of the votes overall.

“It was a message to Randi and a consequence of the risk she’s taken in her leadership role,” said Mr. Simon, the former NEA board member, who is now a policy analyst with the Economic Policy Institute, a think tank in Washington.

### **Wild Card**

Teachers’ union watchers point to Karen Lewis, the new head of the Chicago Teachers’ Union, the AFT’s third-largest affiliate, as a wild card in future AFT policymaking. A newly elected national vice president, she now sits on the union’s executive council.

Though not affiliated with the BAMN slate, Ms. Lewis shares philosophically similar views. She has called the Race to the Top “misguided,” and she opposes many of the Obama administration’s policy prescriptions, including school closures, charter schools, and the use of standardized assessments for judging schools and teachers. Ms. Weingarten has supported such policies, albeit cautiously and only in certain contexts and situations.

Ms. Lewis emerged from a Chicago group, the Caucus Of Rank and File Educators, or CORE. Unlike the loosely affiliated BAMN group, CORE has spent much of its time organizing, and it has already demonstrated its ability to influence policy: At the AFT convention, CORE-affiliated delegates successfully added language eschewing the use of test scores for punitive purposes to a separate resolution on school closures.

The message Ms. Lewis espouses appears to have resonated with the larger AFT. In Seattle, she received the second-highest number of votes for a position on the executive council.

“You will never be heard if all you are doing is screaming and hollering,” Ms. Lewis said, when asked about her new position in the AFT governance. “This is an opportunity for Randi and other people to see how detrimental [the Obama administration’s] policies are.”

For her part, Ms. Weingarten said that she welcomes a variety of viewpoints on the executive council. “Our council has lots of people with different opinions,” she said. “Karen is about helping kids, and there’s a huge connection there. We have different ideas about how, but our value system is the same.”

## **Moving Forward**

The complicated landscape of the unions’ internal and external messaging on the teacher-effectiveness agenda will continue to play out when renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act comes to the forefront on Capitol Hill.

Most of the NEA’s recent policy shifts have taken place quietly, apart from its slow, deliberative governance structure.

In a largely unnoticed development, Mr. Van Roekel has pledged to support affiliates that take positions outside the union’s formal policy resolutions.

The union's \$6 million Priority Schools campaign, meanwhile, will work with schools receiving grants under the federal School Improvement Grants, even those using improvement models the NEA does not favor.

But the NEA's national position on teacher-evaluation procedures remains in flux. At the convention, Mr. Van Roekel announced the creation of a new body, the Commission on Effective Teaching, which will report back to the Representative Assembly next year on such issues as teacher evaluation, but its recommendations will not be binding unless they are incorporated into a resolution.

In the meantime, Mr. Van Roekel might try to put forward a more detailed vision for the union in the coming year, his third as NEA president, Mr. Geiger said.

"I think he's gained a lot of respect," the former NEA president said. "He's highly regarded by state leaders. I think he is moving as fast as he can knowing he has both sides of the issue to deal with."

For Ms. Weingarten of the AFT, the question is a different one: whether the uneasiness she's faced from limited quarters in response to her push for affiliates to examine long-held ideas about the teaching profession will translate into more-organized action.

"It can grow, or it can die out," Ms. Ricker of Minnesota said of that pushback. "We are clearly ripe for some internal conversations."

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