

The Great Divide

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Middle ground is scarce when it comes to collective bargaining for East Baton Rouge Parish public school teachers: You love either love the idea or hate it.

Both views are represented in roughly equal parts on the school board, which will vote next month on allowing teachers to choose whether to adopt collective bargaining and join unions.

If it goes through, teachers would have the power to collectively negotiate salaries, working conditions and other standards related to employment in the parish. As members of a union, they could also be called to strike unless specific provisions prohibit it.

Teachers unions represent 67% of the country's three million active public elementary and secondary school teachers, according to Teachers Unions and Students Performance: Help or Hindrance, a 2007 study in *The Future of Children*, a policy journal from Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

A strike staged by EBR teachers in 1979 failed to win the right to bargain collectively. And the last time the EBR school board voted on the issue was 1998, when collective bargaining was voted down. The vote split along racial lines, with the board's white majority prevailing. This time around, the 12-member board is equally divided between black and white—as of press time, at any rate.

District 11 representative Juanita Sanford, who supports collective bargaining, faced a strong challenge on Oct. 20 from challenger Randy Lamana, who opposes collective bargaining. Whoever occupies the seat will likely provide the swing vote on the issue.

Derrick Spell, who was elected to the EBR board last year, opposes collective bargaining “in any way, shape or form,” seeing no benefit to his District 11 constituents, though conceding it “may help certain individuals,” i.e., teachers. The Princeton-Brookings study found unionized teachers earn 5% to 15% more than their non-unionized counterparts around the country. Working conditions and job security are also better in collective bargaining school systems, the report found.

Spell says he's all for anything that will help student performance, but has seen no evidence that giving teachers collective bargaining will do anything to accomplish that.

“I'd like to see any data that suggests that collective bargaining is going to improve school performance,” he says.

Spell says he's offended that the board is wasting time on the matter when it should be dealing with the real issues, such as lifting academic performance and re-engaging Baton Rouge's middle class with its public school system. The collective bargaining push is just another attempt to diminish the power of local school boards, he says. Spell argues that it's not a white vs. black issue, but rather a “liberal-conservative thing.”

He's also concerned that it'll be rushed through a board vote without the parish's business community having a chance to adequately respond. Spell shouldn't worry; the Baton Rouge Area Chamber is taking aim at collective bargaining.

BRAC CEO Stephen Moret says if collective bargaining goes through, Baton Rouge's business community likely will withdraw future support for school board tax elections, since implementing the school reform proposals BRAC put forward last year—aimed at student achievement—would become much more difficult.

“This is a huge issue for Baton Rouge and the future of public education,” he says.

Moret says BRAC is opposed to collective bargaining partly because it puts union interests ahead of students and offers no clear link to better student achievement.

The Princeton-Brookings study found “students of average ability who attend school in union districts perform better on standardized tests, whereas low-achieving and high-achieving students perform worse.” The study concluded the overall achievement gain doesn't make up for the higher cost—15% or more—of running a unionized school district.

Moret says collective bargaining also impedes reform initiatives that rely on incentives to reward good performance, reduces the power and accountability of school boards, increases the likelihood of teacher strikes and isn't necessary to improve communication between school board members, teachers and administrators.

Steve Monaghan, president of the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, argues that there's plenty of evidence that collective bargaining does result in better school performance. He notes Louisiana is one of only 16 states—most of them in the South—without some kind of state-guaranteed collective bargaining rights for public employees, including school teachers. Louisiana law gives teachers the right to strike but no tools—such as collective bargaining—for resolving disputes. Monaghan says the vast majority of U.S. collective bargaining laws also contain anti-strike provisions.

Meanwhile, in the face of a historical predilection to resist collective bargaining for teachers, problems at EBR schools continue to fester, teachers are afraid to speak out lest they get fired and teachers continue to leave the system, Monaghan says. The solution is to make teachers part of the conversation about how schools are run as opposed to the top-down management system most Louisiana districts operate under, which means giving teachers the choice to collectively bargain if they want to.

He disputes BRAC's arguments, suggesting the chamber's anti-collective bargaining stance is based mainly on economic self-interest. Monaghan doesn't think it's right for wealthy and powerful decision-makers, who regularly use negotiation and compromise in the course of business, to deny the same opportunity to school district employees who provide services.

“If we can't get over this hump we are going to be looked at as a state, as a city, which is trying to move in a progressive way but that looks nothing like other major progressive cities in America,” he says.

Jay Augustine, who also was elected to the school board last year, says the November vote won't be whether to implement collective bargaining automatically; rather it'll be whether the process toward collective bargaining proceeds. Augustine, who says he supports charter schools and other reform efforts, doesn't believe collective bargaining would stymie reform efforts. He does think it would give teachers fairer compensation, better working conditions and due process, among other things.

“Thus far what I've seen it appears to be that the right to engage in the collective bargaining process is something that should be extended to employees in the public school system,” Augustine says. “We're dealing with individuals who are grossly underpaid for the invaluable work they do in our society.”