

WEA – REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY 2010: Thirty Hours Condensed

Mike Page

An Overview of the Assembly --

We heard inspiring speeches from the Governor, from Mr. Bill Gates, Senior, and from our NEA President, Dennis Van Roekel.

We spoke with other delegates about the things which really matter to us and to our students.

We watched a few bandwagons tooting and watched people clamber aboard... That is a part of it, too.

At the end of 3 days... I am assured that it is far better to be working and hoping within the system than to be outside of it.

And, I watched a community striving for the needs of our students and a soaring effort of our highest hopes when we work at what we do.

The 3 Most Important Events

First -- There is a good deal of skepticism and anger toward the efforts to improve student learning by punishing teachers, schools, and school districts – and, thus, the students.

The reports at the convention on the unexpected consequences of seeking money from the Race to the Top [RTTT] and School Improvement Grants [SIGs] are not mythical. They are real.

When you take the money, it includes a poison pill, which is biting teachers who supported application for the vast amounts of one-time-only money. Use the Internet to learn about what is happening as the Yakima School District operates with SIG money. It is wise to be wary of opportunities to compete with other schools for RTTT money.

Second – Many people spoke out that NEVER in their long careers have those who work in the schools been subject to the deliberate and cruel attacks of today.

This is a sobering lesson in being too gentle when dealing with critics and policy makers who appear to have never worked with students, or, if they have, they were so unsuccessful that they went into other careers

Third -- An ANSWER to the QUESTION: “What does my Union do for me?” One answer is that our Education Associations are a lens which we can use to focus our combined energies on those people and organizations who are really not interested in students -- but who are instead interested in making money and careers off of them.

Do your Union dues cover everything we need to do? NO. And that is why each person who works in schools is being asked to send the recommended \$27.50 (or any amount) to the Washington Education Association Political Action Committee [WEA-PAC].

Why send it when you are already paying Union dues? Simply put, it gives us direct access for each local association to our legislature. They know that we are fully committed, and they listen more closely. Each school's voice is speaking directly to them. Being 100% invested in WEA-PAC turns up the volume on our voices.

When K-6 Alternative Learning Experience [ALE] funding was cut from the state budget this past spring, our Alternative Schools did not know anyone to speak for us in Olympia. It was a cold, frightening experience at Bryant to think that 2/3 our students would be gone, perhaps by the end of the week.

It was the equivalent of being told that we should close Kindergarten through 6th grades in Spokane because the state doesn't have the money.

Next year, the knives will be sharper and longer. What we experienced at Bryant will be felt by ALL schools.

Additionally --

When Governor Gregoire and Bill Gates, Sr. came to ask the help of the WEA to support Initiative 1096, the Income Tax initiative, they were well received.

Mr. Gates pointed out that the sales tax system comes from 1935 and it is not working in 2010. As hard as it has been for schools these past couple of years, it will grow worse unless we find a way to iron out the economic wrinkles in state funding. He spoke of writing the income tax law so that the flow of tax dollars is transparent.

Our National Education Association [NEA] President, Dennis Van Roekel, predicts real student to teacher ratios in the classroom of 45 to 1. President Van Roekel is a tremendous speaker and he let loose his anger at the punishing blame being placed on those who work with students.

I heard that two days after speaking in Spokane, he took that anger and the horror stories he heard from Washington state school workers directly to President Obama.

Governor Gregoire spoke of further cuts in school funding in 2011-2012, but offered her intention to work with our Education Associations.

However, with the exception of NEA President Van Roekel, none of them have ever worked, as we do, in schools. In all fairness, Governor Gregoire is a certificated teacher, but she didn't make it past her first experiences of actual teaching. Becoming a tough lawyer and a tougher politician was far easier for her.

Remember Joseph and his Dreamcoat? In times of plenty, we should put some away, but we do not. When times are lean, we pay for our lack of foresight. And, the high peaks of plenty and the low valleys of poverty have steep slopes in between.

Many at the convention have been teachers long enough to have seen promises to schools deferred in times of plenty, and then watched the meat axe approach to budgeting when times are lean. The convention as a whole seemed to support both the Governor and Mr. Gates. However, there were many WEA Representatives who wanted rock-hard promises from the Governor, from the Legislature, and from the supporters of the Income Tax Initiative.

Governor Gregoire told us that our schools in Washington need the money from the Race to the Top grants. But, she also said that she will not push the application until she has the support of every school district and every local Education Association.

The Governor demonstrates a breathtaking intelligence and a willingness to work hard for our students and our schools, but she is a politician. We must remind her and the Legislators that we do not like what we are seeing when it includes support for the punishment of schools, of teachers, and of school districts when they take the money.

It is the cruelest of jokes to offer help for our students and then take it away. Mr. Gates and Governor Gregoire are asking for our help. We need to make it clear that it comes only when they keep the promises that they have made to us. We have the promises in hand. We need to show them we will also remember.