

*Opinion*

*"Democrats stray from education path"*

*By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.  
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ON July 19, The Associated Press published previously secret documents proving that the main national teachers union, the National Education Association, had been one of the key leaders in a clandestine committee that illegally directed the 1996 election activities of the Democratic National Committee.

Under pressure from the Democratic Party and the labor unions, a federal judge had forbidden the Federal Election Commission from publicly releasing the documents it gathered during its four-year probe.

However, The Associated Press was able to obtain the explicit documents revealing the political power bought by big money from shocked FEC staffers who had participated in the investigation.

One memo from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee to a labor union pointedly stated: "Attached is our updated and improved requests for your big bucks."

These links come as no surprise to school reformers. The National Education Association has consistently blocked even the most basic school reforms, such as an end to the teacher tenure that makes public school employment a government job guaranteed for life or the teacher testing that would tell us whether teachers actually know the subjects they are supposed to be teaching.

In California, the NBA's affiliate, the California Teachers Association, has made major campaign contributions to the governor, the superintendent of public instruction, a majority of both houses of the Legislature and a majority of the members of school boards in all of the state's largest school districts.

The question that such illegal, big-bucks influence raises is how did the Democratic Party stray so far from its principles. The Democratic Party has long been the friend of the working man and woman, and it has always been in the forefront of the fight for civil rights.

Democratic leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Claiborne Pell were responsible for establishing the G.I. Bill of Rights and the Pell Grants voucher programs that have allowed so many low-income and minority young adults to go on to college.

Democrat Polly Williams, an African-American former welfare mom, spearheaded the fight to establish the Milwaukee school-choice program.

More recently, it has been the Democratic Party that has been in the forefront in breaking

up the Microsoft monopoly.

But when it comes to breaking up the public school monopoly, the Democrats are in the opposition.

Democratic leaders such as Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Ted Kennedy and the Rev. Jesse Jackson have all been well aware of the dismal quality of public schools protected by that monopoly, and they have sent their own children to private schools. How could they stand in opposition to letting low-income families exercise that same right?

The answer is that old root of all evil and mothers' milk of politics: money.

The Democratic Party has lost its way. It needs to turn down the big bucks from the National Education Association and return to fighting for the rights of working families to a better education.

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