

Opinion

Enemies of reform have a new ploy

California Teachers Association touts initiative that would enrich its members

***By Alan Bonsteel, M.D.,
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The California Teachers Association is the 800-pound gorilla of California education. As the largest teachers union in the state, it has succeeded for years in blocking teacher testing, merit pay, an end to teacher tenure - and, most importantly, the right of parents to choose better schools for their children. Despite its efforts at derailing some of the most obvious and desperately needed reforms of California's catastrophic public schools, its relentless PR machine has masked its anti-reform mission from most of the public. Indeed, many California voters fail to recognize it as the special interest group that it is.

The CTA has grown arrogant, however, and, given enough rope, it may hang itself. In recent weeks, two developments have put the CTA on a collision course with its own falsehoods, and its efforts to explain away the unexplainable may open the eyes of many.

In November, the Internal Revenue Service announced an audit of the National Education Association, the national parent of the CTA. For years the NEA has claimed to be a nonpolitical organization - and therefore tax-exempt - despite giving millions to political candidates and other political causes.

In 1993, the NEA got a "get-out-of-jail-free" card from the Clinton administration after an IRS audit, precisely because it had been a big donor to the Clinton-Gore campaign. The Bush administration, however, isn't going to cut it any slack, and if the IRS finds the obvious - that the NEA and the CTA are pervasively political - they could be slammed not just with back taxes to 1993 but with criminal indictments.

Under this kind of pressure, one would think that the CTA would be keeping a low profile on the political front. However, just days after the IRS audit announcement, the CTA began touting an initiative called the "Improving Classroom Education Act" for the November 2004 ballot that would raise property taxes to pay for higher teacher salaries. At a time when the state is staggering under a record deficit, the initiative would mandate spending \$3 billion more per year on K-12 education, 88 percent of it on teacher salaries - or an \$8,800 yearly increase for every teacher in the state.

The initiative coerces charter schools and publicly funded preschools to force their teachers to join the CTA. It also establishes criminal penalties for noncompliance, putting an administrator rash enough to use the new tax money to fix a broken toilet at risk of being thrown in the slammer.

In 1988, the CTA was able to pass, by a slim margin, Proposition 98, which mandated a minimum-spending floor for our California public schools. That initiative was widely perceived as a unifier that brought to the same table numerous factions with an interest in California's public schools.

The new initiative, however, pits the CTA against every other stakeholder in California public education. It is such a blatant political power grab that one can only hope it will be transparent to the public and roundly rejected.

Equally important, however, is what this initiative says about an organization that claims to be nonpolitical and therefore deserving of tax-exempt status.

So which is the real California Teachers Association: Is it a nonpartisan professional organization dedicated to better education for our children? Or is it a highly politicized, tax-evading labor union bitterly opposed to the most basic education reforms?

The actions of the CTA seem almost calculated to convey to the public that it is the latter. Good - the time is long overdue for Californians to understand what the CTA is really all about.