

It's Time to Re-imagine and Reinvent the MTEA
By Bob Peterson
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I'd like to explain in detail why we need to re-imagine and reinvent the MTEA.

First, let me be clear. We are facing a crisis of historic proportions. Public education is the foundation of any socially just, democratic society. Educators are the foundation of public education. Yet the survival of both teacher unions and public education is up for question.

Governor Walker, the Republican Legislature and their right-wing corporate supporters have laid down the gauntlet. ACT 10 is a direct attack on public workers, our unions and the entire public sector. Walker's massive cutback of funding for public schools and other public services is an unprecedented assault on our community.

Our challenge is to win greater public support for public education and to win greater identification to the MTEA and the MEAA from our own members.

As a union, we will not be able to adequately respond to these new realities and challenges unless we re-imagine and reinvent the MTEA.

First, I'd like to talk about some lessons from the past.

Milwaukee has been ground zero in the battle over public education for more than 20 years, ever since the private school voucher program began. Fundamentally, vouchers are based on a free-market, right-wing ideology that doesn't support public education. At the same time, however, voucher proponents successfully convinced many people that vouchers were needed because MPS would not reform itself and that the union was an obstacle.

Let's be honest. The union did not adequately respond. Too often, when faced with criticisms we were reactive and defensive. We criticized the exaggerated charges against us but we did not differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate criticisms.

So, lesson number one we need to learn. The union must be proactive. We can't just circle the wagons and defensively dismiss all criticisms.

A strong teachers' union rests on a tripod of concerns. One leg is bread and butter unionism, which ensures quality wages, hours and working conditions and focuses on the contract. The second leg is professional unionism — understanding that we as educators take ownership of teaching and learning. The third leg is social justice unionism — the understanding that we must build strong relations with parents and community groups not just to ensure adequate support for public education, but so that we as a union are also involved in improving the community.

During the era in which vouchers gained an increasing foothold in Milwaukee, too often the union's energy was focused on bread and butter. The contract was king. When there was a problem in MPS, too often we said in essence, "That's a problem for the administration. You fix it, but don't you dare violate the contract."

As we look at the past, lesson number two is that being a union means more than defending the contract.

Which brings me to lesson number three from the past. We can't just change our rhetoric. We have to change our practice.

In recent years, the MTEA has clearly made progress and has better understood the need for professional unionism. We have talked about the need for educators to take ownership of teaching and learning. We began to understand the need to collaborate and work with the administration and school board, and not to view them merely as bosses and management. We started the TEAM program with the administration that addresses the problem of struggling teachers.

We also recognized the need to build ties with parents and with the community. Within the union, we talked about moving from a service model to an organizing model.

Yet we were not able to fundamentally change our practice. We used some of the right rhetoric, but not enough changed.

Today, in this era of Walker's assault on teachers and the public sector, we don't have the luxury of relying on past practice.

So, what do we do? How do we build for the future?

This spring we participated in massive opposition to Walker's policies. For many of us our Wisconsin Spring showed us what democracy looks like. It showed us the power of people – of regular people like you and me as we signed petitions, marched, traveled to Madison and picketed Governor Walker's house in Wauwatosa. And many of you took that energy into the recall campaigns this summer, and while we just missed our goal, we won back two seats in the Senate. We will carry that energy into a recall campaign early next year against Walker himself.

As we work on these broader political levels, we must also reinvent and re-imagine the MTEA. Today must be the first day of a process to change our union so we are able to thrive and be powerful in a non-contract world.

Our educators' voice has to be more powerful, more credible, and more focused on solutions if we are to win the hearts and minds of our own members and the broad public.

We face several essential tasks.

The first task is to understand that the union is not just the staff and elected leaders. Too many members view the union as the staff and a few leaders on Vliet Street who they call if there is a problem. The staff in turn works hard to service hundreds of calls each week. But we are **all** responsible for building our future. We need to relocate union activity and power to the school level.

Second, we must better understand who are our friends and who are our enemies. The MPS administration has many problems — we all know that. But in this era of anti-public education, they are not our enemy. We must continue to defend the rights of all educators. But we must also learn to work together with anyone who believes in and supports public education.

Third we must adopt a social justice perspective and rebuild both our schools and communities. In the past, when we talked of a labor/community alliance it usually meant convincing the community to support labor's demands. But an alliance must go both ways. We must also support and defend the needs of our families and communities — whether for quality jobs, against segregated housing patterns, or for improved healthcare. We are all in this together.

I have talked mostly of re-inventing the MTEA. I've outlined what I believe are essential tasks. But, together, I want us to re-imagine the MTEA.

Please imagine with me... a union that has such active members that we've reclaimed the craft of teaching and taken ownership of teaching and learning in our schools. We have defeated the obsession with data-driven instruction, and have reaffirmed that we are child-driven and data-informed.

Imagine that in each school, staff have identified which faith-based groups, neighborhood and community organizations they belong to. We are able to get our message out to tens of thousands of people without relying on mainstream media.

Imagine our members, on behalf of the MTEA, work with community groups and faith-based groups in our common struggle to provide quality jobs, health care and housing for all.

Imagine a union that uses social media and the Internet to not only have vibrant discussions among members, but to reach non-educators across the city.

Imagine a union, that even without a contract, has so much influence in the community and on the school board that when the school board adopts a "handbook," it does so in collaboration with the union and empowers educators rather than stripping them of rights.

Imagine a union that works with the administration and other community allies to build a system of quality schools that become the envy of parents throughout the city. We have a

number of quality schools right now — we know that. And we know that, working together, we can build more.

Finally, imagine a union, so vibrant, so professional, that members unquestionably join. Not only because we defend their rights and working conditions, but because it is one the most respected organizations in our community — and the leading force in the city in building quality education for all children.

Imagine. Re-imagine. And together we will reinvent the MTEA.

Thank you.