

Big money helps teacher unions stack elections - Mike Reno – Detroit News

From Wisconsin to Ohio, the pendulum is swinging away from union dominance of government, back to a focus on taxpayers and citizens.

But this isn't just a remote national conflict; the struggle is happening in local communities throughout Michigan, and merits attention this November.

Look no further than your local school board election to examine union influence in government.

Michigan's largest teachers union, the MEA, works diligently to insure it is represented on both sides of the bargaining table. They conduct statewide "Elect Your Boss" rank-and-file training classes, and the MEA-PAC (Political Action Committee) is one of the wealthiest and most powerful lobby committees in Lansing.

State campaign finance records show that the MEA-PAC gives generously to school board candidates. Individual teachers and local union PACs contribute money as well. But more importantly, locals furnish boots on the ground.

The locals organize phone banks and literature drops, where teachers will contact parents and ask them to support the recommended candidates.

This union stranglehold over local school boards has been so effective that our state government has been compelled to intervene, passing new oversight and regulation of our public schools and how they compensate teachers.

Consider this example from Rochester.

I still have a copy of the "mobilize and motivate" letter widely distributed in the last Rochester school board election, signed by the president of the local MEA unit.

In this call to arms, she writes, "We need all bodies at the polls... We believe we can work with the four declared (school board) candidates..."

And boy, did they work with them.

The newly elected Rochester Board of Education, all seven being union-backed, dealt with the worst economic crisis in our generation by laying off learning consultants and media assistants, while giving salary increases and bonuses to the district teachers. In that same year, they raised the local debt millage by 30 percent.

Of course, the trustees will deny that the union support influenced their decisions, and will point to token concessions in the last contract.

Yet they remain silent on why they continue to increase salaries and benefits year after year in the face of declining revenue and deficit budgets.

Most people are astounded this kind of union and trustee relationship is even legal, but it is, and repeats itself every election cycle.

Just recently, the MEA local issued its bi-annual summons for this year's crop of board candidates to appear before them, hat in hand, to seek its "recommendation" and all of the benefits that accompany it.

Fortunately, we see signs that the pendulum is swinging. Candidate Jeremy Nielson published a letter in which he politely declined the MEA invitation. Nielson says he "wants to earn the endorsement and respect of each and every teacher based on the merits of his candidacy," but will not seek the approval of an organization that he will ultimately bargain with as a trustee.

Contrast this with two of the other candidates, who themselves are members of a teachers union, one of whom actually wrote a book on union involvement in the public sector.

Rochester is the example, but this isn't just a Rochester issue. These dramas play out in most of the 500-plus school districts across the state. The voting public remains largely unaware of this union stamp on the ballot box.

Given that local school board trustees collectively spend one-third of the state budget — some \$15 billion, with 85 percent going to union jobs — the public must face this situation head-on if public education is to remain sustainable for future generations.

This will be a watershed election year as union special interests battle for the hearts and minds

of voters.

Watch these local school board elections, for they will be the canary in the coal mine, and will signal whether union dominance of elections — and tax dollars — is becoming history in Michigan.