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FALLING FOR THE TEACHERS UNION “AVERAGE SALARY” DIVERSION

By GARY LANDRY

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Did you know that public school teachers in Miami-Dade County, Florida, earn \$3,350 to \$10,000 a year more than teachers with the same degree and experience in Atlanta, Georgia? Or did you realize that teachers in Naples, Florida, are paid over \$1,000 a year more than their counterparts in Atlanta, while teachers in Fort Myers earn about \$700 more than their Atlanta colleagues? I could go on, but you get the idea. Teachers throughout Florida are paid significantly higher salaries than teachers in the highest paying school district in Georgia.

How can this be true? The teachers union in Florida constantly tells us that educators in the state are paid an average of about \$5,000 less than teachers in Georgia. Has the union been lying?

“Lying” may be a bit harsh, but it's certainly fair to say the union has been engaged in spin control. That's public-relations jargon for telling half-truths. If you believed the union spin, you've simply been a victim of the union propaganda machine and its use of average salaries.

Average, by definition, is the middle point between two extremes. Average salary does not refer to any particular salary. It actually distorts the truth and, in the case of teacher salaries, it hides the negative effects of the failed, union-controlled, collective bargaining process.

Using averages allows the union to hide the fact that the union has bargained higher pay for some teachers—mostly union members—at the expense of others, mostly nonunion members. This, despite the fact that the majority of teachers in Florida are not union members!

However, under the collective bargaining laws, the union, whether it holds a majority or not, is allowed to be the official bargaining agent for all teachers in any given school district.

An examination of any school district salary schedule reveals the union's bias toward non-union members. In district after district, the union has refused to negotiate significant increases to the lower half of salary schedules in favor of padding the upper half of the pay scale. This is no accident, especially when considering one important piece of evidence: union membership has been on a steady decline for the past two decades. Fewer and fewer new teachers have joined the union. Union membership is left with older teachers—those having taught for 15 to 20 years or more. Although the union is the sole bargaining agent for all teachers—members and nonmembers alike—and as such is supposed to be representing all teachers equally, the union has failed the test. In negotiations with the school district, the union manipulates the salary schedule so that the largest raises are provided to those who have been teaching longer and most likely to be union members. For example, in Broward County, a first-year teacher moving to the second year receives an \$800 raise, while the teacher moving to the 20th year of teaching receives a whopping \$7,281 raise! This can hardly be considered fair negotiations for all. Consider other school districts where teachers receive as little as \$53 for moving from their first year to their second year of teaching. In Hillsborough County it is even worse! Teachers there receive nothing—in fact, the salary schedule in Hillsborough grants no raises for teachers for any of the first seven years! And in

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the eighth year, the raise is only \$286. Contrast that with those who have 20 years or more experience and who receive about \$1,000 for every additional year of teaching.

These facts are hidden as the union uses its "average salary" diversion. And school districts are at fault, too, for refusing to force its contract negotiators to say no to this union bias. School district officials know that the teacher shortage we are hearing about is due largely to the fact that young people are shunning the teaching profession. They do so because salaries—particularly those in the first five to ten years of their careers—are not competitive with other professions.

Florida will never be competitive as long as we continue allowing unions to manipulate the salary schedules as they have done for more than 20 years in the state.

Arguably, Florida is already more than competitive in what it pays teachers midway and beyond in their careers. That is evidenced by comparing Florida's salaries with salaries of teachers in the Atlanta Public School system. I selected Atlanta because it is one of the highest paying districts in Georgia, and Georgia is the state the union most often cites in its average salary diversion to try to convince parents and policymakers alike that Florida lags behind in teacher pay.

A starting teacher in Miami-Dade County is paid \$32,275, while a starting teacher in Atlanta is paid \$32,398. The difference there is negligible. But look at top pay. In Miami-Dade, it reaches \$56,275, while in Atlanta it is about \$10,000 less at \$47,650.

In comparing Atlanta to Broward County, we see that beginning teachers in Broward are paid about \$30,300, while top pay is \$56,335. Worth noting is the fact that beginning pay in Broward is about \$2,000 less than beginning pay in Atlanta while top pay is about \$10,000 more.

Similarly, beginning pay in Hillsborough is \$30,000 while top pay is \$50,137. Again, beginning pay is behind Atlanta, while top pay is well above. Even in smaller districts in Florida, beginning pay is below Atlanta, but top pay is well above. In Okaloosa County, beginning pay is \$27,510, while top pay is \$48,438. I could cite real example after real example by looking at the salary schedule rather than using averages. And in each citing, Florida salaries beat those in Atlanta at the top of the scale, but they lag behind on the beginning end of the scale. It proves how the salary schedule is biased toward those teachers most likely to be union members.

It must be pointed out that Georgia has no collective bargaining laws. Unions exist there, but not for the purpose of bargaining salaries. Also, Georgia recognized the need to make salaries more attractive to young people just starting out in their teaching careers. That is why it enacted a minimum salary. No teacher in Georgia earns less than \$28,300.

Contrast that to Florida where beginning pay is less than Georgia in all but a small handful of school districts. The union needs to keep beginning salaries low so that when they average the salaries, they can create the illusion that Florida is behind Georgia.

It's time that we see through the smoke and mirrors to realize that the unions are little more than good illusionists. It's time also for school superintendents to demand from their negotiators a more equitable distribution of funds along the salary schedules that do not favor one group of teachers over another.

Note: Salary schedule information taken from FEA website for only year available 2000-2001.

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