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Dwindling membership; failed election scheme make FEA irrelevant

BY GARY LANDRY

The Florida Education Association (FEA), with its plummeting membership and out-of-step agenda, was proven irrelevant in this month's statewide election. Florida's voters overwhelmingly defeated the union's anointed gubernatorial candidate despite its two-year, all-out assault on Governor Jeb Bush and his education agenda.

Not only did the union gain the disdain of Floridians from one end of the state to the other, but union bosses even enraged their own members by callously spending a reported \$2 million of members' dues money on their losing candidate. That's money that could have been used in many ways to help teachers do a better job in the classroom. Instead, union bosses funneled members' dues money to a losing candidate it knew it could control to maintain the status quo in Florida education. Maintaining the status quo would have allowed union bosses to continue collecting extravagant salaries and financial perks, all paid for by union dues collected from union members. Maintaining the status quo would have allowed the union bosses to continue to operate the union as little more than a self-serving political machine for union leaders.

It is this complete conversion of the union to a political machine that became so obvious in this election. Union bosses began building the Bill McBride candidacy a year before the union held its supposed candidate screening process by which candidates are invited to outline their platform for education. The union leadership then votes to endorse the candidate they will support. The screening and endorsement process was, for this election, a sham from day one. McBride had already been preordained by union bosses.

Their tactic was one of many mistakes union leaders made, prompting members to question not only the legitimacy of the screening process, but also the financial management of the union.

As evidenced by all the interest the election has brought to the inner-workings of the union leadership, it is now revealed to members and nonmembers alike that this once-powerful union is a mere shadow of its former self. The reduced membership speaks volumes. In years past, FEA leaders skillfully managed to make teachers, legislators and the general public believe that its real strength was in its numbers. Union leaders managed to convince many in Florida that it represents all of Florida's teachers, or at least a solid majority.

This election has not only prompted a close examination of the management of the union but also provoked a hard look at membership numbers. In this scrutiny of membership numbers, we find fewer than one-fourth of Florida's 275,000 certified teachers are union members. Among public school teachers, the number of union members is far below half.

On its public website, the FEA claims a membership of 122,000, yet its own internal publications cite a membership of only 106,000 members. By FEA's records, the membership is comprised of about 60 percent teachers and 40 percent non-teachers. FEA membership includes bus drivers, cafeteria workers, custodians and other non-professional personnel. Therefore, 60 percent of the 106,000 total members means that only about 63,000 *teachers* are union members. That's only 23 percent of all of Florida's certified teachers or about 41 percent of the 154,000 public school teachers. Either way, it is hardly the powerful, influential force the union claims to be.

It's a number, in fact, that makes FEA irrelevant.

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