

5/28/14

Attack Season

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It's election campaign season, and for some politicians, education seems to be a target again. Along with the economy, environment and security, polling shows that issues surrounding education, particularly public education, garner attention and focus. Thus some politicians, who are trying to find a story or narrative for their campaign, can't resist attacking public education. Let's look at the typical strategies taken from the "Attack Public Education" playbook. While most of us are aware of these decades-old tactics, it's good to be reminded and be wary. They include the following:

Attack #1 - "We Need Quality Choices in Education" – This statement is generally code for charter schools and vouchers. While the research is mixed on the achievement success of government-funded charter schools, there are glaring red flags that are well documented in states that have embraced charter schools on a large scale. They include purposeful exclusion of special needs students, financial improprieties by unregulated third party school management companies and chaotic governance environments. We all know vouchers can be a disguise for tuition assistance for a private, separate and exclusive education. This undermines the longstanding core principles and beliefs upon which our country was founded.

Attack #2 - "Parents Need More Control and Autonomy" – While this is a resonating statement, the reality is that a key foundational principle of public education is local control. In Illinois, we have 863 school districts, each with its own governing board that is elected by community members. Additionally, parents are involved at every level of our local schools, including advisory committees, hiring teams, school board committees and booster organizations. Parents have a strong voice in our local schools.

Attack #3 - "Teachers Need to Be More Accountable" – This statement is glaringly misleading as teachers in Illinois have never been more accountable. Rigorous pre-teacher credentialing standards and a new mandated comprehensive evaluation process that incorporates student growth into the instructor's evaluation rating are elevating the profession. Illinois is fortunate to have one of the strongest teaching forces in the country. While the incidents of low performing teachers are rare, systems are in place to identify, support and, if necessary, release weak instructors.

Attack #4 - "We Need More Dollars Dedicated to the Classroom" – Look closely and analyze the finances of each local school district and you will see the majority of expenditures are directly devoted to classroom instruction. On average, 80% of a district's operating budget is dedicated to instruction. The remaining 20% funds student busing, food service and utility bills – expenses that are essential to effectively and safely operate a school district. Additionally, school districts have worked hard to reduce costs outside the classroom by restructuring and streamlining operations, contracting services

with third party vendors, and leveraging technology and new systems.

Candidates vying for elected office should be careful about criticizing public education and specifically teacher bashing. Illinois teachers do an amazing job, despite the poverty rate increasing from 15.4% in 2000 to 21.6% in 2011. Teachers do not control significant factors that affect student performance, such as poverty and home life. Teachers don't control educational preparedness and language experiences from birth to school. They do not control their students' family structure, discipline, nurturing or sleep hours. They do not control domestic abuse, alcoholism or neighborhood violence, drugs or safety.

Elected officials should stand up for our remarkable teachers and local public schools as they overcome these significant challenges in preparing our students for the global work force. Our amazing public school teachers have never been more prepared, worked harder, been held more accountable and met greater challenges to help our students succeed.

So let's hope when our politicians are on the campaign trail they champion and advocate for the bedrock of our democratic society – our local public schools and their amazing teachers.