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**HEADLINE:** WEA'S POLITICAL ACTION BENEFITS CRITICS

**BYLINE:** CHARLES HASSE WEA president

**BODY:** As the state's largest professional organization for education employees, the 74,000-member Washington Education Association is proud to be a powerful and unabashed advocate for public school students and employees.

Our mission is a simple one: to make public education the best it can be for students, staff and communities.

By the very nature of public education, much of our advocacy occurs in the political arena. Most of the important decisions about public education are political decisions. Local school board policies, state rules and regulations and federal mandates affect the quality of education we provide young people. Members of the WEA have exercised political power to raise standards for students and teachers. We have lobbied for lower class sizes. We have campaigned for better pay for school employees so that our state can recruit and retain the quality educators students deserve. We have fought for laws that protect students and staff, and we've supported measures encouraging parental involvement in public schools.

Our contributions to candidates are made with voluntary donations to a political action committee, WEA-PAC. Through it, WEA members have helped elect dozens of pro-public-education candidates, Republicans and Democrats alike.

A portion of WEA general dues is used for issue advocacy, which is separate from WEA-PAC's support for candidates. We have promoted policies leading to stricter standards, higher test scores and lower dropout rates. Multiple court decisions, including one from the state Supreme Court, have reaffirmed WEA members' fundamental right to be involved collectively in political issues that affect public education. It's regrettable that our success in advocating for public schools and employees has made us the object of relentless public-relations attacks from those who oppose our mission.

With the guidance and support of a right-wing political organization called the Evergreen Freedom Foundation, a small group of longtime WEA detractors recently formed Northwest Professional Educators. In his Nov. 6 Post-Intelligencer Op-Ed piece, NWPE president Jeff Leer touted the new organization as an alternative to the WEA. Yet Leer's group, unlike WEA, provides no assistance in collective bargaining, no field staff to support members, no governmental relations team to advocate in Olympia and no in-house research, instructional, legal or communications staff.

While NWPE's leaders downplay the group's involvement in politics, its parent organization, the Association of American Educators, propounds the views of Milton Friedman, the architect of the controversial school privatization movement. AAE leadership is also linked to extremist efforts to end all government involvement in schools and has strong ties to anti-union groups such as the **National Right to Work** Foundation. Televangelist Pat Robertson is a prominent AAE supporter.

Their renunciation of WEA notwithstanding, NWPE members are better off professionally and financially because of WEA's political action. It is worth noting that NWPE members have not returned the cost-of-living salary increases they received this year as result of a successful WEA campaign. Nor have they volunteered to return to the higher class sizes of the past.

Voters, parents and school employees should be skeptical of NWPE and the motivation behind its attacks on WEA members. The money, individuals and organizations promoting the NWPE speak volumes about its true agenda.

The WEA has existed since 1889 and has a long history of working to improve public education in our state. We are candid and direct about our goals and our mission. Our funding comes from our members, and our members have full and open access to the minutest details of our budget. Indeed, it is our members who determine our annual spending priorities, policies and goals.

Do groups such as the Evergreen Freedom Foundation or the Northwest Professional Educators embrace the same devotion to

to openness or democratic decision-making? Given the secrecy surrounding its financial backers and the obfuscation regarding its radical agenda, the answer is clearly no. NWPE seeks a legitimacy to which it is not entitled.

Unfortunately, it is easy for groups such as these to criticize and detract from the progress WEA members have made toward improving public schools and the lives of those who work in them. Our success as advocates will continue to make us a target of NWPE and those who fund them. Nonetheless, WEA members will continue to exercise our constitutional right and will continue to meet our professional responsibility to advocate for students, schools and educators. .

**NOTES:**

Charles Hasse, a fourth-grade teacher on leave from the Highline School District, is president of the Washington Education Association

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