

When AFT President Randi Weingarten endorsed Hillary Clinton for president, her action was criticized by many who saw it as undemocratic. They questioned how the decision was reached and whether AFT's membership had been consulted.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia's announcement that she plans to ask the NEA Fund Council to recommend Mrs. Clinton in the Democratic primaries is very different. It clearly follows NEA's established procedures, involving votes by three (!) elected bodies before it can be implemented in any state. (See my previous post describing the process.) Many members this week have suggested that it is too soon to support a candidate. I believe that this reaction is based on an incomplete understanding of the purpose of a recommendation and fails to take into account the national electoral timetable.

When our union supports a candidate, we gain three things: 1) we increase that candidate's chance of winning; 2) we get the opportunity to influence that candidate throughout the campaign; 3) we also increase our influence with the candidate after she or he is elected. If we wait until our members have made up their minds, we greatly diminish all three of those outcomes.

We did not have a good experience with President Obama, but it was not because of early endorsement. We did not do an early endorsement in 2008. In fact, we were the last major union to endorse him. When candidates addressed the Representative Assembly in 2007, then-Senator Obama did not have the best education platform. He made clear that he supported charter schools and test-and-punish accountability. Then-Senator Clinton was clearly much more knowledgeable and much more aligned with our positions on education issues. By waiting until 2008, our ultimate choice was between Senators Obama and McCain. We chose Obama because he was better on many other issues important to us and hoped he would change on education. But hope is not a strategy and he did not change. Obama owed us nothing; he had organized our members to support his campaign without our help. He knew we had no realistic alternative.

This year we have three Democratic candidates with good records on education. NEA and our state affiliates have supported each of them when they ran for Senator or Governor. But it's clear to almost everyone that Governor O'Malley has no chance of winning the presidency. Lily has concluded that's also true about Senator Sanders. There will be literally billions of dollars spent on the other side. Our side very likely will be unable to match that, and perhaps we don't have to. But we'll need hundreds of millions of dollars, and it's very hard to see how Senator Sanders can raise that kind of money. Democrats also need very high voter turnout from people of color. Mrs. Clinton is likely to get those voters; Senator Sanders has very little experience reaching out to, representing, and mobilizing black, brown and Asian voters.

Every single one of this year's Republican candidates would be a disaster for public education. Several of them have done their best to destroy public schools and public employee unions in their states. I believe Mrs. Clinton is the Democratic most likely to defeat the eventual Republican nominee, and so I think we should help her become the Democratic nominee. This is the conclusion that has led Lily to put forward her recommendation. On September 16, Lily explained her recommendation in a conference call with members of the NEA Fund Council and Board of Directors. Then State Presidents and NEA Directors asked questions about charters; testing; Secretary Duncan; poverty; the growing shortage of educators; corporatization; college affordability; race, class and education support

professionals. Mrs. Clinton's answers showed that she has been paying attention to us and to our members around the country.

If we should support Mrs. Clinton, when is the best time? Our experience in 2008 suggests that if we wait until after all the primaries, NEA will be irrelevant to her campaign. And NEA will have missed its best opportunity to shape her policy positions.

Our California primary is not until June, but early primaries begin in February. If the Fund Council and NEA Board postpone the decision until their next meeting in February, we will be too late to influence the majority of primaries.

If NEA leaders decide in October to support Mrs. Clinton, CTA State Council has three meetings: in October, January and April in which to decide whether the California Teachers Association should follow suit.

Some have questioned why other candidates were not included on the conference call, or in additional calls. Recognize that while individuals may not have made up their minds about whom to support or what action NEA should take, Lily has. She is making a recommendation. She gave us all an opportunity to hear information and ask questions that would help us vote "yes" or "no" on her recommendation.

I am voting "yes." I thank all of you for your input. I will continue to read your messages.