

# 'I'm Angry About This. This Is Crazy'

## Teacher Union Bosses Bash 'Conversion Charter,' Enrage Parents

Today the Westminster Community School in Buffalo, N.Y., is that rarest of things: an inner-city public school success story.

Just 11 years ago, Westminster (then known as School 68) was one of the worst-performing schools in Buffalo. Reading and math test scores were far below average, while discipline and truancy problems were high. Drug dealers roamed the playground.

But under the leadership of current principal Yvonne Minor-Ragan, the school has completely turned around. Test scores are now the best in the district and rival those of many suburban schools. Enrollment has increased 61%; student retention rates have soared.

At a recent public hearing, parents such as Latresa Cheek, who has two children at Westminster, gushed about the changes. "If you look at how far this school has come, you'll see a vast improvement. They got rid of the graffiti and the drug activity, and now I feel safe having my kids there," said Ms. Cheek.

M & T Bank, based in western New York, deserves much of the credit. The bank and its employees have already poured \$10 million and countless volunteer hours into efforts to help teachers and students and refurbish the school building.

### Success Threatened by Empire State's Teacher Monopoly-Bargaining Law

Unfortunately, Westminster's success is threatened by New York's public-sector monopoly-bargaining law, which hands teacher union officials "exclusive" power to negotiate with school boards over employees' pay, benefits, and working conditions.

Wielding this power, union bosses have imposed restrictive seniority rules determining which teachers get pink slips when tight budgets require layoffs.

Because of these Big Labor-backed rules, last year Westminster nearly lost several bright, young teachers, while timeservers with seniority didn't have to worry a bit.

Some teachers who have accumulated ample seniority "should have been selling doughnuts" instead, charges Westminster parent Anza Keith, a former cop.

Thanks to M & T Bank's massive

infusions of cash, so far Westminster hasn't been severely harmed by the monopoly bargaining-spawned seniority rules.

But to protect the school's future, this year School Superintendent Marion Canedo, M & T Bank, and parents asked the Buffalo Board of Education to allow Westminster to become a district-sponsored charter school starting this September.

In June the board approved this "conversion charter."

Assuming this change goes ahead, under New York law Westminster teachers' pay and benefits will still be determined by the union boss-negotiated contract, but Big Labor seniority rules will no longer dictate layoff policies.

### Union Don Demanded Board Of Regents Reject Change That Parents Had Backed

Teacher union boss Phil Rumore is evidently terrified that Westminster may set an example of how well all New York schools could perform were they not burdened by government-imposed monopoly bargaining and all of its attendant union work rules.

Mr. Rumore, chief of the Buffalo Teachers Federation (BFT), an affiliate of the 1.3 million-member American Federation of Teachers union, even wrote the state Board of Regents to demand that it reject the change desired by Westminster parents and approved by the Buffalo Board of Education. (On July 21, the Regents defied Mr. Rumore and approved the plan.)

Mr. Rumore falsely claims the charter conversion will cost the school district money. But the district's own financial people point out the agreement will actually result in a net savings by as soon as the 2005-2006 school year.

He also raises a red herring about the building not being handicapped accessible. But this never bothered him when Westminster's teachers were fully under the BFT hierarchy's control. And construction to make the building accessible to all kinds of students is now underway.

Westminster parents aren't buying the excuses made by Mr. Rumore and his cohorts.

"What bothers me the most is that they



BUFFALO NEWS/SHARON CANTILLON

**Special-ed teacher and parent Vicki Baxter choked up with rage at the Buffalo teacher union hierarchy.**

[the BFT brass] say they're concerned for kids, but they're not thinking about the kids. They're thinking about themselves," said Margaret Parish, who has three children at Westminster.

Vicki Baxter, a special-education teacher as well as the parent of a Westminster pupil, spoke even more bluntly about union-boss opposition to the conversion charter: "I'm angry about this. This is crazy."

### Only Genuine Solution Is Monopoly-Bargaining Repeal

"Phil Rumore's vicious attack on a successful inner-city public school is a compelling illustration of why the National Right to Work Committee lobbies against teacher monopoly-bargaining laws," said Committee Vice President Doug Stafford.

"Thanks largely to Committee members' determination and persistence, today 16 states, including Colorado, Arizona, Texas, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia, either do not authorize or explicitly bar union monopoly bargaining in public schools.

"Restoring personal freedom for teachers in the 34 states that already have statutory monopoly bargaining will be an uphill battle.

"But it is a necessary precondition for the effective implementation of any real public-school reform." 