

Will Better Teachers Fix Education? The Battle Between Unions and Reformers

By Phil Brand

Summary: Many education reformers are convinced that relying on new alternative ways to recruit teachers will produce better schools. But placing new hires in public schools systems often means displacing tenured teachers and circumventing union contracts and union-backed state licensing rules. Can the reformers succeed?

Our schools have a shortage of quality teachers. Though presidential candidates across the political spectrum speak of the country's need for great teachers, the union-dominated cartel of teacher-training programs and government-run schools discourages innovators from becoming teachers. "Our schools are like a bucket with holes in the bottom, and we keep pouring in teachers," writes Thomas Carroll, president of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

By themselves, new teachers are unlikely to reform the bureaucratic giant that is public education in this country. In the U.S. about 15,000 government-run school systems operate nearly 100,000 schools that educate 55 million kids. This year the government will spend an estimated half trillion dollars, or about \$350 million each hour that school is in session. It is projected that over the next decade America will need 2 million new teachers. An operation of this size and scope has created some very powerful vested interests.

Currently, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the country's two largest teachers' unions, have more than 3 million members (this includes public school teachers and school support personnel). The lifeblood of these unions is maintenance of the



Girding for battle: Washington, D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty (at lectern) announcing the appointment of education reformer Michelle Rhee (left) as Chancellor of D.C. public schools in June 2007, as Joel I. Klein, Chancellor of New York City public schools (partially obscured behind lectern) looks on.

status quo; government-run schools are staffed from top to bottom with union employees. In 2005, these two groups whose national headquarters are just blocks from the White House, reported a combined income of \$434 million, according to their 2005 tax returns. Almost all the money comes from member dues. But that sum is just a fraction of all the teachers' union dues taken in nationwide: State and local affiliates of the NEA and AFT collect far more dues money than their respective national organizations.

The Davids of school reform who confront this Goliath have a formidable task. Many have focused on helping parents find a way out of failing public schools that entrap chil-

dren. Recently, some reformers are aiming to improve education by leveraging new personnel to force change on the system from within. These reform-minded groups are working on new ways to bring talented entrepreneurs and teachers into the education field. They are gambling that there are many

February 2008

CONTENTS

Will Better Teachers
Fix Education?

Page 1

Briefly Noted

Page 8

OrganizationTrends

ways to reform the system, even one as big and inflexible as public education.

The Reform of Teaching

Public schoolteachers typically start their careers by graduating from a school of education and receiving state certification. They end their careers with tenure, seniority-based pay increases, and the prospect of a defined-benefit government pension. Long-dominant teacher unions reinforce and guarantee this career track for millions of public school teachers.

A majority of teachers still enter the profession by traditional routes—education remains the third most popular undergraduate major (105,000), and the most popular master's degree (157,000). And while more and more teachers are receiving "alternative certification," the numbers don't tell the whole story. *Alternative Certification Isn't Alternative*, a new report by the Fordham Foundation and the National Council on Teacher Quality, finds that celebration would be premature. Many "alternative" programs require similar course work and pedagogical requirements as traditional education programs. Furthermore, roughly 70% of "alternative" programs are run by education schools themselves. The education school cartel has put up fierce resistance to real alternatives.

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Arthur Levine, former president of the Teachers College at Columbia University, wrote a scathing report in which he likened teacher education to the Wild West.

Of course, there are many reasons why schools are failing kids, but teacher education is a major problem area. "Teacher education in the U.S. is principally a mix of poor and mediocre programs," concludes Arthur Levine, former president of the Teachers College at Columbia University, in a 140-page report, "Educating School Teachers," issued in 2006. Levine called teacher education "the Dodge City of education, unruly and chaotic."

But not all the news is so discouraging. The recruitment, preparation and retention of teachers has become a focus for reform groups. Groups with names such as Teach for America, The New Teacher Program, Building Excellent Schools, and KIPP (the Knowledge is Power Program) are shaking things up. They are reforming public schools incrementally and from the inside, making inroads for future reformers to build on. While small in staff size and budget, they are creating opportunities for entrepreneurs to change the system.

Last summer Washington, D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty outflanked the teachers' unions and other political interest groups when he

appointed Michelle Rhee, an unknown outsider, to be chancellor of D.C. public schools. Despite spending \$13,000 per pupil, the third highest figure among the 100 largest districts in the nation, Washington's schools rank dead last in student test scores among major city school systems nationwide. Even the previous president of the D.C. Board of Education, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, recognized the dire situation and became a supporter of charter schools.

But D.C. schools rank first in the share of the budget spent on administration, creating a bureaucracy that is a big part of the problem. The 37-year-old Rhee is one of the new reformers. How she fares may indicate whether reformers working from the inside can successfully promote choice and accountability in public school systems, or whether they will be sucked up and spit out by the entrenched bureaucracy of school administrators and teacher unions.

In 1992 Rhee was a member of one of the first classes of Teach for America, the best-known alternative recruiting organization for aspiring teachers. She is emblematic of the new breed of young teachers and school leaders arriving at their positions by unorthodox

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routes, and her appointment symbolizes their efforts to cut through the bureaucratic politics of the public schools.

Teach for America

Teach for America (TFA) puts shock troops on the front lines in the education reform battle, offering a new way to bring a different kind of teacher into the classroom. The 501(c)(3) nonprofit was founded 18 years ago by Wendy Kopp, then a senior at Princeton, to create a new corps of teachers who would become future education leaders. Kopp has since guided more than 17,000 college graduates through the TFA program, which selects top graduates from diverse backgrounds and majors (only 2% major in education), gives them an intensive five-week summer training course, and then uses state-approved alternative certification programs to train them while they teach in poor and minority urban and rural school districts.

TFA currently works in over 1000 schools in 26 school districts, but, says Kopp, “We aim to increase our impact exponentially in the next five years.” Last fall it met its goal of placing 5,000 TFA corps members in schools where they will teach more than 400,000 students during the two years they commit to the program. TFA plans to have more than 7,500 teachers in more than 30 cities by 2010. A typical TFA expansion city is Denver, Colorado, where 56 TFA teachers were placed last fall. TFA has raised funds from local supporters, including a \$250,000 grant from the Denver-based Daniels Fund, a charter school supporter (assets: over \$1 billion).

While corps members are salaried employees of the public school districts where they teach, TFA’s expanded operations come with a hefty price tag that is largely met by private donors. Teach for America will have to increase its annual operating revenue to \$100 million to meet its expansion goals. In 2006 foundation grants provided 30% of TFA’s \$57 million revenue; corporations 18%; individuals 15%; local governments and school districts 13%; and the federal government 12%. TFA can count on large multi-year foundation pledges, including \$10 million each from the Doris and Donald Fisher Fund (assets: \$81 million), the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (assets: \$1.2 billion) and the Broad Foundation (assets: \$1 billion).

Supported primarily by private charity, TFA

also participates in the Americorps network of national service programs, allowing the teachers in its two-year program to collect a \$4,725 annual federal payment for educational expenses or student loan repayment. TFA may soon benefit from a Teach for America Act, a 2007 bill introduced by Representative Chris van Hollen (D–Maryland). It proposes a \$15 million earmark of federal funds to Teach for America in 2008, rising to



Teach for America founder Wendy Kopp

\$18 million and \$20 million for 2009 and 2010, respectively.

The attention TFA has garnered has also earned it the ire of the teachers’ unions. The National Education Association complains that TFA is “a temporary fix” for teacher shortages. One 2002 study by two education academics who are partially funded by the liberal Rockefeller Foundation, claims ominously that TFA members are “under-certified” and that education policies relying on them “appear harmful.” (“The Effectiveness of ‘Teach for America’ and Other Under-certified Teachers on Student Academic Achievement: A Case of Harmful Public Policy,” by Ildiko Laczko-Kerr and David C. Berliner, available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n37/>) However, the study’s findings seem at odds with a 2005 survey by Kane, Parsons, and Associates that found 74% of principals thought TFA teachers were more effective than other beginning teachers, and 63% said they were better than the teaching staff as a whole.

Clearly anticipating their future role as expert witnesses in a union lawsuit, the authors of the NEA-endorsed study (to which the NEA website conveniently provides a Web link) note that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act requires all teachers to be “highly qualified.” The authors muse that their work may assist the courts in deciding whether teachers who do not go through a standard credentialing process meet this federal standard. A court decision may not be that far away, as the liberal advocacy group Public Advocates, a California-based 501(c)(3), filed a lawsuit on August 21, 2007, against the U.S. Department of Education. It alleges that public schools that use alternatively credentialed teachers, including Teach for America teachers, violate the NCLB’s “highly qualified teacher” requirement.

Other New Ways to Recruit Teachers

The example of Teach for America has spurred a host of independent organizations and projects that aim to follow in its footsteps. After graduating from the TFA program in 1997, reformer Michelle Rhee founded **The New Teacher Project (TNTP)**, which she headed until she assumed her new job as Washington public schools administrator. Rhee’s group seeks out and trains recent graduates and mid-career professionals to become teachers in troubled urban school districts. Its alternative certification program annually recruits, trains and certifies about 2,700 teachers for “high need” schools. The program reports that it has trained and placed 23,000 teachers in urban school districts.

In 2005 TNTP published a study that enraged the teachers’ unions. *Unintended Consequences: The Case for Reforming the Staffing Rules of Urban Teachers Union Contracts* looked at union seniority rules governing teacher transfers in public schools. (The study, by Jessica Levin, Jennifer Mulhern, and Joan Schunck, is available at <http://www.tntp.org/files/UnintendedConsequences.pdf>.) It points out that because of a “last-hired, first transferred” seniority provision in teacher collective bargaining agreements, newly-hired teachers often don’t know until the last minute where, and if, they will be teaching. Furthermore, principals have almost no flexibility to fire poor teachers. But the study’s recommendation to revise union contracts was dismissed by the American Federation of Teachers. AFT claimed that changing the union con-

tract was not an option, and that it would not help young teachers.

Interestingly, when she was picked to head D.C. public schools last summer Rhee made the transfer policy a priority item. Rather than let poorly-performing senior teachers bump new teachers from school to school, Rhee says she will place new teachers wherever she needs them to be. As for the tenured teachers, Rhee admits she is contractually obligated to leave them in place, but she will give them no assignments. The authority to hire and fire the right people is essential to any boss's job, Chancellor Rhee concluded.

Fenty and Rhee also focused on the school district's notorious central administration. They pushed a bill through the D.C. Council last month that would reclassify most of the several hundred central office workers as "at-will" employees, giving the Chancellor the tools she needs to remove ineffective workers. The Washington Teachers Union—whose image is still recovering after former WTU president Barbara Bullock was sentenced to nine years in prison for stealing millions of dollars in union dues to buy furs and jewelry—vigorously opposed the measure. Understandably, the union is worried that it could be next.

The National Institute for Excellence in



The Fordham Foundation's Chester Finn

Teaching (NIET) is another worthwhile teacher recruitment project. Founded in 2005, it operates the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), which has placed new teachers in 130 schools in low-income areas, supplementing their base pay with performance bonuses. NIET and TAP were created by Lowell Milken, who with his brother Michael heads the Milken Family Foundation (2004 assets: \$252 million). In 2005 NIET had revenue of \$2.3 million, and TAP received \$5 million from the Milken Family Foundation.

Prompted by the outreach programs of reform groups, states are also beginning to recognize the benefits of expanding access

to the pool of would-be teachers. South Carolina recently joined Florida, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Idaho, and Utah in passing legislation to streamline the process of teacher certification. These states accept applicants from the **Passport to Teaching** program, an alternative certification program that tries to get new teachers into classrooms in 10 months while letting teacher-trainees continue to work at their old jobs while preparing for a new career. Passport to Teaching is sponsored by the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, a school reform group founded in 2001. Its best-known "Directors Emeritus" are school choice advocates Chester Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and Lisa Graham Keegan, former Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The new teacher preparation programs are dwarfed by academic teacher education programs that still produce most new teachers. However, university-based programs are "now rapidly losing market share at a dizzying rate," notes Daniel Fallon of the education division of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2006 assets: \$2.5 billion). A good thing too, says Emily Feistritzer, president of the **National Center for Alternative Certification**, a new information clearinghouse that has Carnegie support. Feistritzer's bottom line: "If the alternative route did not exist would this person have gone into teaching?"

Preparing School Leaders: A Better Way?

In a 2003 report the Fordham Foundation's Chester Finn explained why sponsoring alternative ways to pick and credential new teachers will not just help students learn, but also produce better schools and school administrators: "Expanding the pool of candidates for school leadership positions to include talented younger teachers and people from other backgrounds would bring new energy, ideas, and skills into our public schools. Breaking the cartel would also bring healthy competition to education schools, as other suppliers vie with them to provide school leaders with the training they need."

Fortunately, donors and school reform groups are seriously trying to improve the training of school leaders. For instance, **Building Excellent Schools** (2005 revenue: \$2.9 million) was founded in 1993 to foster urban charter schools. It has a year-long fellowship program that so far has prepared 26 individuals to start and run urban charter schools. A

GOOD DEEDS, SQUANDERED LEGACIES

A cautionary tale first published in 1994, this third edition by Martin Morse Wooster testifies to the continuing importance of the issue of donor intent. It contains new material focused on the ongoing *Robertson Foundation v. Princeton University* case and an update on the tragic battle over the Barnes Foundation. An Executive Summary is also included.

Wooster, senior fellow at Capital Research Center, tells a cautionary tale of what has gone wrong with many of this country's preeminent foundations. But he also shows that other foundations, such as those established by Lynde and Harry Bradley, James Duke, and Conrad Hilton, safeguard their founders' values and honor their intentions.

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similar program is the **Broad Residency in Urban Education**, a project of the Broad Foundation. This program has worked with 110 business executives interested in applying their skills to school management. Many have gone on to manage urban charter schools. Teach for America has launched its own **School Leadership Initiative** to take its graduates up the ladder to administrative positions. TFA's goal is to transform 800 alumni into school leaders by 2010, "positively impacting the professional development of more than 18,000 teachers and the academic success of 1.5 million students." Currently, 275 TFA alumni serve as school principals or district superintendents.

The new cadre of reform-minded school entrepreneurs is becoming increasingly influential. TFA alumni Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin started **KIPP—the Knowledge Is Power Program**—charter schools. Originally there were two in New York City and Houston, but there are now 57 separately incorporated KIPP schools serving 14,000 students. KIPP also has a separate \$13 million foundation that trains school leaders.

KIPP charter schools hire many TFA teachers: Susan Schaeffler, director of KIPP DC, is proud that in KIPP DC schools most of the teachers and principals are products of TFA. Test scores have sky-rocketed, and KIPP's success has produced long waiting lists of parents eager to enroll their kids in its charter schools.

Unions, however, are hostile to charter schools because they hire non-unionized teachers and personnel, skirting the collective bargaining process that unions hold dear. In 2006 the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) and the Progressive Policy Institute brought together 30 union and 30 charter school leaders to talk about their relationship with one another. At the conference, no union leader agreed to stop opposing charter schools.

Another TFA alumnus, hedge fund manager Whitney Tilson, works to overcome hostility to charter schools in New York City. Frustrated that his own party opposes school choice, Tilson helped launch **Democrats for Education Reform** (DFER), an advocacy group that raises funds to "challenge the entrenched party power of teachers' unions and other education sector interests, who largely define the official Democratic



Pennsylvania state Representative Dwight Evans (D-Philadelphia), a pro-school choice lawmaker

position on education issues." DFER's website says it supports "mechanisms that allow parents to select excellent schools for their children, and where education dollars follow each child to their school."

Tilson is unusual. When Democrats fail to toe the line, the party usually fights back because it is dependent on labor union support. Witness the previous D.C. mayor, Democrat Anthony Williams, who, after being frus-

trated by the failure of the city's schools to improve, embraced charter schools and eventually supported the Washington Scholarship Fund to give parents more options. Shortly thereafter the Washington Teachers Union withdrew its support of the mayor, and the NEA campaigned against the scholarship fund. Williams's approval ratings in public opinion polls plummeted, and many believe it was because he bucked the unions and Democratic Party orthodoxy.

Another Democrat, Pennsylvania state Representative Dwight Evans, is paying the price for his heresy. The lawmaker, who represents part of Philadelphia, received the Champion for Charters award from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools last year. Evans played a key role in securing the passage of Pennsylvania's charter school law in 1997, and was willing to adopt serious accountability measures to improve Philadelphia's failing schools. For this, Evans drew the wrath of the teachers' unions as well as the AFL-CIO. He lost his bid to become Philadelphia mayor last year, and his pro-school choice position virtually guarantees he will not rise within the Democratic Party.

Opponents of Reform

Despite all the new entrepreneurial organizations dedicated to reforming the system, the "entrenched party power of teachers' unions and other education sector interests," remains strong, according to a Fordham Foundation report. The NEA and its affiliates are proud that they have been, in their own words, "leaders in the fight to oppose alternatives to public schools." The American



Adrian Fenty's predecessor as D.C. mayor, Anthony Williams, also embraced the charter school movement.



A KIPP classroom in New York City, summer 2007

Federation of Teachers has demanded that “charter schools be subject to local collective bargaining contracts, hire only certified teachers and be approved only by local school districts,” the report notes. Of course, charter schools were created largely to move beyond those powerful interest groups and their stifling regulations. Regarding alternative teacher credentialing, the AFT’s position is that “the best way to bring an adequate supply of well-trained teachers into the classroom is not by dismantling collegiate teacher education, but rather by strengthening it—by bringing higher quality, greater resources and much more coherence to the way teacher education screens and prepares teacher candidates.” It isn’t surprising that the teachers’ unions say more money will fix the problem.

Union collective bargaining agreements are at the heart of the problem, as Michelle Rhee discovered at TNTP and now as head of Washington, D.C. public schools. Principals are afraid to tangle with the unions to cut the red tape necessary to fire bad teachers, so they simply force them to transfer. That forces out talented new teachers who must make room for more senior teachers who have been “excessed.”

Rhee recently told the Washington Examiner that D.C. Public Schools will pay almost \$5.4 million in full-time salaries to 68 teachers and staff whom she would rather fire if she could.

Why? Because Rhee is stuck with a union contract that requires the city to retain senior teachers even if she deems them incompetent. But with D.C. schools the worst in the nation, people are fed up, and Rhee’s arrival on the scene gives frustrated parents a glimmer of hope. According to education expert Paul Peterson at Harvard, the shortage of qualified teachers arises largely because union contracts thwart principals’ efforts to “recruit, reward, and retain the truly qualified teachers.” That is just what Michelle Rhee is starting to do.



George Parker, president of WTU

But it’s not only unions that keep reform at bay. “Opposition from political constituencies within and around public education, including teachers unions, school administrators, and school boards, has thwarted the spread of K-12 entrepreneurial activity,” write Frederick Hess and Chester Finn in *Education Next* (Spring 2007).

Cracks in the Establishment Wall

The teachers’ unions depend on union-staffed public schools. But parents are leaving in droves. Not surprisingly, it is Washington, D.C., with the nation’s worst schools, where the “charter-school drain” is most advanced. The *Washington City Paper* observes: “Since chartering began in 1996, the District has seen dozens of schools established. In each, the principal has almost total control over the hiring and firing of his or her teachers, answering in most cases only to a board of trustees. And parents have flocked to charters; last year, nearly 20,000 students were enrolled in 55 charter schools, none of them with a collectively bargained teachers’ contract.”

Even the head of the Washington Teachers’ Union seems to understand the power of choice and competition. “The way to slow the growth of charter schools is to improve the public schools,” says WTU president George Parker. “I think unions in general have to step up to the plate and give educating children a high priority.” Well, one would hope so.

That Michelle Rhee has been picked to head the 55,000-student Washington school system shows how far the education reform movement has come. Reformers from organizations like Teach for America are growing in number and influence, which is good news for public, charter and private schools that desperately need new ideas and talent. The battle is far from won, but the reformers emphasizing choice and accountability are making slow progress. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to transform the current K-12 education system from the inside out—and without a political upheaval. It’s a nice thought. Wouldn’t there be just a little *schadenfreude* in seeing the unions hoisted by their own petard?

Phil Brand is Director of Education Watch at the Capital Research Center.

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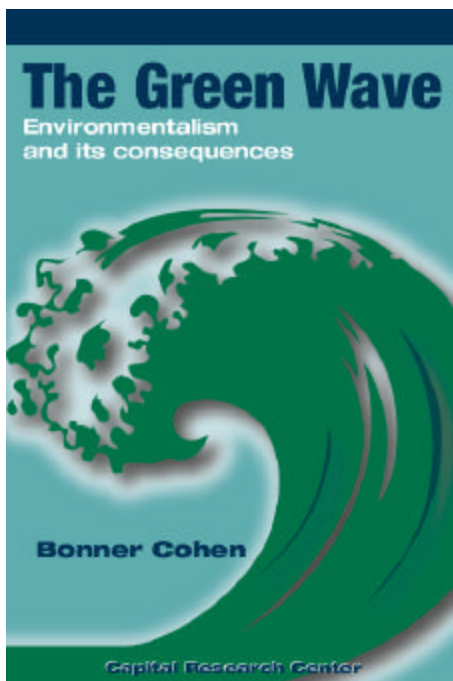
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BrieflyNoted

Liberal philanthropist **George Soros** paid for half of a slanted Lancet study of Iraqi war deaths that claimed 650,000 people were killed as a result of the invasion of Iraq – 10 times higher than consensus estimates of the number of war dead, the (UK) Sunday Times Online reports. Soros paid almost half of the £50,000 cost of the 2006 report that ran in *The Lancet*, a medical journal. The *New England Journal of Medicine* estimates that only 151,000 people - less than a quarter of *The Lancet* estimate - have died since the 2003 invasion. “The authors should have disclosed the [Soros] donation and for many people that would have been a disqualifying factor in terms of publishing the research,” says **Michael Spagat**, an economics professor at the **University of London**.

The U.S. abortion rate dropped to its lowest level since 1974, according to a report by the **Guttmacher Institute**. “We don’t know why,” said **Rachel Jones**, a senior researcher who wrote the report. In 2005, the rate fell to 19.4 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44, for a total of 1.2 million that year, continuing the downward trend that started after the abortion rate peaked at 29.3 in 1981. **Janice Crouse**, director of the **Beverly LaHaye Institute** at **Concerned Women for America**, said one reason could be a decline in abortions among teen girls, which could be partially explained by the success of abstinence programs.

General Motors is demanding that the U.S. government create a national ethanol fuel station infrastructure at the same time the company announced that it has invested in **Coskata**, a cellulosic ethanol startup company, *National Review Online* reports. “We need to grow E85 (ethanol) stations,” GM CEO **Rick Wagoner** said. “It is time for the U.S. government to do it through regulation.” *Coskata* plans to make 100 million gallons of ethanol a year from weeds, and has been financed by venture capitalist **Vinod Khosla**. *Khosla*, a friend of Bill Clinton and Al Gore who has long advocated government market guarantees for alternative energy, has also worked with **Kleiner Perkins**, a venture firm Gore joined last year to promote carbon markets.

The anti-war group **Code Pink**, whose members are known for shouting down opponents, covering themselves in fake blood, and exposing themselves publicly at demonstrations, called off a planned protest in Miami’s Little Havana, the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* reports. The ladies had planned to demand the arrest of anti-communist militant **Luis Posada Carriles**, but backed off when his supporters rushed their vehicle. “Posada Carriles is no terrorist. The terrorist is **Fidel Castro**,” said one protester. *Code Pink* whined that Miami police didn’t do enough to protect their freedom of speech. The anti-American group, whose most prominent members are **Cindy Sheehan** and **Medea Benjamin**, was profiled by **John J. Tierney** in the December 2006 *Organization Trends*.

After Kansas City, Missouri mayor **Mark Funkhouser** refused to fire a 73-year-old woman from a city board last year, the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** (SCLC) has pulled its 2008 convention from the city. SCLC bemoans the fact that **Frances Semler**, a member of the city’s parks board, is opposed to illegal immigration and a member of the **Minuteman Civil Defense Corps** and wants her booted from the board that oversees outdoor party permits and off-leash dog areas. The SCLC is cypocating the **National Council of La Raza**, which pulled its 2009 convention from the city to protest Semler’s political views. (**Kevin Mooney**’s profile of *La Raza* appeared in the December 2007 *Foundation Watch*.)

Far-left group **United for a Fair Economy** released a report claiming subprime mortgages were “ruthlessly hawked” and that a “solid majority of subprime loan recipients were people of color.” According to the group, the recent wave of foreclosures “represents the greatest loss of wealth for people of color in recent U.S. history,” and predicted the nation was about to experience an economic downturn that could match the Great Depression.

The **National Taxpayers Union** (NTU) has launched the “Standing Together” Taxpayer Grant Program to provide financial assistance and advice to citizen activists serious about forming a taxpayer group and guiding it to self-sufficiency during the first critical year of development. Limited government activists are welcome to apply for grants. For more information, see <http://www.ntu.org/main/page.php?PageID=137>.

