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Meet old-school new teacher's union boss Michael Mulgrew

By THOMAS W. CARROLL

With the governor urging action, the New York Legislature is considering lifting the cap on the number of charter schools in the state.

This has presented Michael Mulgrew, the new president of New York City's teachers union, with a choice: stand with the reformers, straddle the line or go to the mattresses against change.

He has chosen what's behind door No. 3.

In fact, despite the emergence of a powerful new national reform consensus led by President Obama, Mulgrew is consistently proving himself to be a bare-knuckled trench-fighter - a throwback to the muscle-flexing union leaders of the distant past.

Witness the evolution. In 1998, the UFT was one of the chief opponents of the original charter-school law. But in subsequent years, Mulgrew's predecessor, Randi Weingarten, repositioned it as a progressive union that did not fear charters and, in fact, embraced them. Weingarten's boldest move in this regard was her decision to open two UFT charter schools.

In her last years as UFT president, Weingarten distanced herself from the more viscerally anti-charter state teachers union, which one suspects she viewed as out of step with the emerging national education-reform zeitgeist.

Last weekend, we got a glimpse of a new UFT. With much fanfare, Mulgrew issued a blistering report offering charter-school "reforms" that would disembowel the movement in the city and beyond.

There was not a subtle passage to be found in the 16-page document - just red meat for the anti-charter union masses as Mulgrew attempts to position himself for re-election in spring 2010.

Some of the crasser proposals: mandatory unionization of all charter schools (so much for "teacher voice"); elimination of the State University as a chartering entity (ironically SUNY awarded the UFT charter to Weingarten); government price

fixing of the fees that charter schools could pay nonprofit charter management organizations; and government control of management salaries (even if paid for with private funds).

But wait, there's more: Mandated payment of union wages on all construction contracts (even though the state provides no building aid for charter schools); and enrollment quotas for charter schools that would mandate that each school enroll exactly the percentage of special-education students, free-lunch students and English language learners as does the local district average (even though many district schools don't).

Mulgrew's point is not actually the advancement of any specific proposal, but rather to throw out there as much mischief as possible to gum up charter schools - even if it tanks union-represented charter schools in the process.

It's not the only place he has repositioned the union to aggressively naysay reform. Mayor Bloomberg proposes getting rid of the worst teachers, instead of simply those with the least seniority, when low-performing schools close; placing time limits on how long out-of-work teachers can be placed in the "absent teacher reserve" pool while not teaching; streamlining the process for getting rid of bad teachers, thus emptying out the city's notorious "rubber rooms"; and considering how much progress a teachers' students have made before granting the teacher lifetime tenure.

Whereas Weingarten might have at least entertained the possibility of finding a consensus solution, Mulgrew seems hunkered down in opposition to each of these ideas.

New York's district teachers may have a fighter representing them. Only trouble is, he's fighting for all the wrong ideas.

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