



Missouri Public Teachers, Take Note: Union Membership Is Optional

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



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It's back to school time, and new teachers have a little homework to do before the start of the school year. This summer the U.S. Supreme Court [ruled](#) that government unions, including local teachers' unions, can no longer require non-members to pay fees to the union as a condition to employment. This had basically been the case in Missouri already, but for 22 other states, the ruling was a significant leap forward in workers' rights, decades in the making.

But regardless of the extent to which the case affected a given state, the Court's ruling highlights a pair of important questions that Missouri educators have to grapple with each year: namely, why might teachers join a union, and if they joined, what would their dues pay for?

Unionized teachers do receive some tangible benefits from their membership, such as legal services in the event they're fired or sued, and liability insurance. The cost of union membership varies depending on location and the union involved; dues are typically either flat, such as the annual \$219 for the [Missouri State Teachers Association](#), or a percentage of salary, such as the one percent for the [St. Louis chapter of the American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\)](#). Of course, if a teacher doesn't join, he or she is still covered by the salary schedule; not joining has [no impact](#) on things like health insurance, tenure, or seniority.

But if a teacher does join a union, a portion of their union dues often goes to advocacy work and to support political candidates. Given the diverse opinions of teachers, the funneling of dollars to particular causes often runs afoul of an individual teacher's own personal beliefs. For example, at the national [AFT conference](#) just a few weeks ago, a resolution was passed that stipulated what policies a candidate must support to receive the union's endorsement. These included, among other things, universal health care, universal and free child care, doubled per-pupil expenditures for low-income students, and free college

What a lot of teachers don't know when faced with the decision of joining a union is that the vast majority of the benefits unions offer are also available through other vendors. For example, dues for [Association of American Educators \(AAE\)](#), a non-union professional organization for teachers, are just under \$200 per year, and the benefits are similar to those offered by unions—disability insurance, legal protection—but without the politics. And if joining a group of any kind isn't your style, teachers can always buy many of the benefits they want a la carte on the [open market](#).

In short, Missouri teachers have a lot of options in determining how they'll advance their professional interests—and they can do so with or without the political speech embedded in the operations of a government union. And especially after the passage of HB 1413, teachers in Missouri are particularly empowered to have a say in who represents them to their districts, and to see how unions spend the money they receive from members. Perhaps one day, public school teachers will even be able to negotiate their own employee contracts and have a freer hand to choose their health insurance and retirement plans, like many of the rest of us already have. But until then, Missouri teachers still have a lot of choices that they can make, and fortunately, subsidizing a union's political speech doesn't have to be one of them.

About the Author



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Susan Pendergrass was Vice President of Research and Evaluation for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools before joining the Show-Me Institute. Prior to coming to the National Alliance, Susan was a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Education during the Bush administration and a senior research scientist at the National Center for Education Statistics during the Obama administration. She earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy from George Mason University.

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