

UNION POWERHOUSE PRACTICES

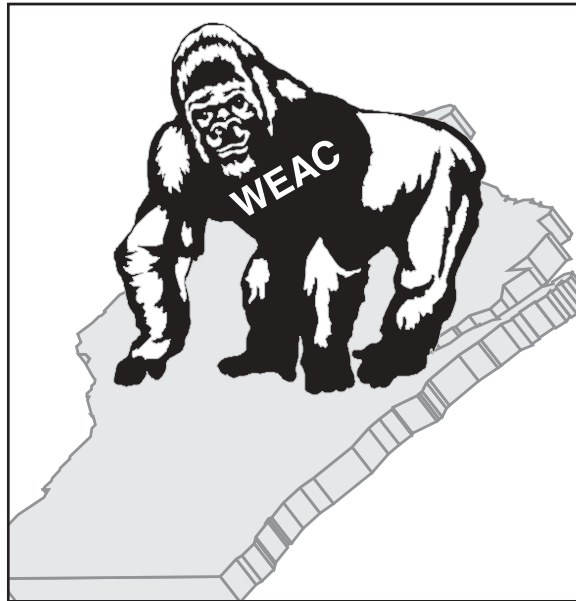
POLITICAL PRAGMATISM

JEFF MAYERS

It's often said in the capital city that the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) is the 800-pound gorilla of Wisconsin politics. And for years, that gorilla has been seen as the power behind Democrats, especially legislative Democrats. Republicans have caustically described the state's largest teachers' union as a wholly-owned subsidiary of the state Democratic Party. Some Democrats have

put it another way: WEAC is the Democratic Party in Wisconsin. And most Democratic candidates, while sometimes irked by WEAC's use of its power, dutifully have courted the union and counted on it for support.

But in the prelude to the 2002 elections, many conventions about the state's largest teachers' union seem to have been turned on their head as Wisconsin politicians, unions, and the business lobby prepare for the biggest governor's race since 1986. Adding to the volatile political mix this year was the Capitol's solution to a \$1.1 billion budget deficit. The ultimate solution, as this article was written at the end of March, was still uncertain but insiders were betting that the position of WEAC and Gov. Scott McCallum — the preservation of



two-thirds K-12 school funding — would prevail.

WEAC influence was heavily felt — something to be expected for an organization that has reported about \$1.6 million in political activity in the 2000 elections; has reported devoting \$465,515 to lobbying Wisconsin government in 2001, and has spent about \$2.5 million since 2000 on an unprecedented public relations campaign

that has changed the political dynamics by branding “great schools” as a synonym for a quality public education in Wisconsin. WEAC has proven to be a power inside the Capitol and on the campaign trail, marshaling the dues and foot leather of its 92,000 members who work in public schools, technical colleges and state government.

WEAC recently stirred controversy by working with the new Republican governor and his GOP-leaning business allies to preserve K-12 education funding in the short-term while forging a solution to the vexing two-thirds education financing problem in the long-term. It certainly wasn't the first time WEAC had worked with Republicans or a

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Republican governor — union officials, while opposing former Governor Tommy Thompson, negotiated with him at times on budgets and other legislation, such as public employee retirement packages. WEAC also has backed Republican candidates over the years even before the union began to concentrate on working both sides of the political fence after the state Senate went Republican in 1993.

WEAC's moves, however, brought controversy from within and without because this election cycle is the Democrats' best chance to take back the East Wing in more than a decade. WEAC made a lot of Democrats nervous that they'd be jilted — just when they were on the verge of a long-anticipated return to power in the statehouse.

Late last year and early in 2002, several events occurred that brought scrutiny to the union and brought charges of a “secret deal” with the fledgling governor.

- First, McCallum, the long-time lieutenant governor under ex-Governor Tommy Thompson, hired as his education consultant Morris Andrews, the ex-WEAC executive director. Some Republicans saw this as a move to bring on somebody who could help Team McCallum show leadership by tackling a big issue, mollify a natural enemy through a triangulation strategy, and unsettle Democratic opponents.

- McCallum a little later appeared with most of his Democratic rivals at a WEAC regional gubernatorial forum one year out from the election and suggested he'd be willing to get rid of revenue caps and the QEO. School district budgets have been squeezed under the former; teachers' pay has been restricted by the latter, the Qualified Economic Offer. Both provisions were enacted upon the urging of Thompson.

- Then a highly publicized, but private meeting at a northwoods resort, organized by Andrews on behalf of McCallum, brought together special interest representatives that rarely talked beyond hellos in the halls of the Capitol. WEAC was there in force, joining rep-

resentatives of the Realtors, Farm Bureau, Milwaukee Public Schools, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce and other groups in a retreat atmosphere that appeared to break the ice on the biggest of budget issues. But while participants praised McCallum and Andrews, critics won the early public relations battle — slamming the governor for taking a secretive approach that left out important players such as state schools chief Libby Burmaster and top lawmakers. Talks quietly have continued into 2002 with some predicting an “October surprise” from McCallum — a pre-election breakthrough agreement by what has been dubbed “the Northwoods Group.”

McCallum said recently he brought business and education leaders together because education is key to a growing economy. “I found it interesting that this was front-page news,” McCallum said. “Education and business, economic growth, are intertwined. We need the skilled workforce for higher per-capita income.”

The two-thirds funding commitment has become a budget monster, consuming roughly five billion in state tax dollars a year. It's part of an increasingly wobbly three-legged stool of school revenue caps, teacher pay limits, and a state taxpayer commitment to pay two-thirds of education costs. Pressures from many sides are making the stool unstable, and the budget crunch — expected to immediately confront the governor elected in November given the Band-Aid approach of the current budget adjustment — has the stool on the verge of collapse, according to budget-watchers.

- And in early 2002, McCallum unveiled a \$1.1 billion budget fix that preserved most K-12 school funding while phasing out shared revenues for municipalities.

That's when Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, who often has clashed with the union, effectively used the charge of a “secret deal” as part of his assault on McCallum's call to kill shared revenues for cities. Norquist also attacked Andrews, calling him “the rotten fence post” of Wisconsin politics. And Representative Luther Olsen, the Republican

chair of the Assembly Education Committee, fed the speculation when he offered this budget analysis at a meeting where he thought no reporter was present.

The number one goal . . . wasn't school funding; it was to get Scott McCallum elected as governor. The only reason education got spared (in McCallum's budget plan) is so that WEAC will either endorse the governor or stay out of the race.

McCallum denied a deal, and said at the time:

I find it interesting that a governor has to defend being pro-education in this state. It's sad . . . There are some who don't understand there has been a shift in politics in Wisconsin. It's not politics as usual anymore. We can't have educators and businesspeople fighting each other in Wisconsin.

It didn't matter that McCallum and the union hotly denied the charges. The charges had legs and even spawned a small protest against WEAC in Madison.

One of the critics was Ed Garvey, the WEAC-endorsed Democratic gubernatorial candidate in 1998.

Four years ago when I ran for governor with Barbara Lawton, we had a pro-teacher agenda that drew standing ovations from teachers across the state, but that didn't matter. A deal had been made in the big building on the hill. (WEAC headquarters on Nob Hill in Madison).

WEAC would focus on the Russ Feingold race and would not attack Tommy Thompson, the most anti-teacher, anti-education governor in memory. "Tommy got a free ride," 1998 Democratic gubernatorial candidate Garvey wrote in a March column in the liberal *Capital Times* newspaper in Madison.

Don't get me wrong. If WEAC had plunged into the race, Thompson would have won, but they did only perfunctory work, and that hurt the entire ticket. I thought it might be me but no, they are back at it with this sitting governor and his Tonto, Morris Andrews, the Republican strategist who . . . now manipulates behind the scenes at taxpayer expense. . . . No "deal" was made with Morris Andrews and WEAC to stay quiet during the gubernatorial election? C'mon. We may be out of the loop but we are not stupid.

Stan Johnson, the energetic new WEAC president, shrugged off what he calls the "little games" played by some critics.

"My job is a little bit different," he said. "I have to deal with reality." He noted that McCallum proposed no instruction cuts in the face of a \$1.1 billion deficit. "(The governor) understands the value of great schools." Johnson will preside over this year's WEAC "representative assembly" — an annual policy meeting of 900 union members from around the state — in La Crosse on April 26-28. It could be a lively meeting.

Johnson is confident of the union's path. "When you stand face to face with (members), they understand," he said.

Johnson is leading a union that is moving from a party focus to an issue focus. The union is graying; a typical member has sixteen years experience and a master's degree. As Johnson says, WEAC gets a lot of interested calls whenever the Legislature starts looking at early retirement packages. But there is a generational shift occurring, with new, less politically active members worried about what the union will do for them in terms of professional development.

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“An extensive part of the organization goes to getting younger members involved,” Johnson said.

The X-generation listens on issues. The older generation listens on party. . . . But you still have to deal with your past. We will always be a bread-and-butter union. However, this next generation of members has different values and different needs.

Engaging those younger members was part of the goal of the “Great Schools” campaign, which officially began in September 1999 with a bottom-up movement aimed at engaging members and educating the public about what teachers do and what kind of resources it takes to create a quality education environment. A WEAC history says the union organized a field operation to encourage one-on-one interviews with members to talk about their goals. In one year, a third of WEAC’s members participated. Then in the spring of 2000, WEAC launched an aggressive multi-media advertising campaign — the largest in the union’s history.

Johnson is an enthusiastic messenger, proclaiming that the campaign is “spreading the values” of teachers from the classroom to the public and political decision-makers. “Great Schools” saturates whatever the union does and is credited by friends and foes with shifting the political debate and countering the largely negative media coverage of Milwaukee Public Schools that had seeped into the minds of swing voters in suburban Milwaukee.

As to WEAC’s 2002 gubernatorial endorsement, Johnson explained an elaborate WEAC process. It has begun in a way, with gubernatorial forums at regional WEAC gatherings like the one McCallum attended in November 2001 in Kimberly.

The formal process gets under way after the representative assembly with interviews of the candidates. After that the WEAC political action committee weighs in; the chosen candidate must receive a two-thirds majority. Then the board of directors votes; the candidate must receive a simple majority. Finally, and decisively, all of those members who have vol-

untarily given the \$17 PAC assessment get to vote by mail. “There’s no other group that goes through that,” Johnson said.

Johnson said WEAC will look at all the gubernatorial candidates closely, including McCallum. He acknowledged that despite the favorable budget, McCallum “will have to overcome” the fact that the union “has leaned Democratic,” Johnson said. But he said, “The other candidates will have to come out and give their vision.” He also conceded that the Democratic candidates have been supportive of top WEAC positions, generally promising — not just considering — the elimination of revenue caps and the QEO.

The final say, he concluded, is in the hands of the members. “This is a turning point for public education,” he said. “We need a leader (who can) provide the resources for the future of this state and public education.”

Those who know the union, however, said it would be a truly shocking development if WEAC didn’t endorse the Democratic nominee and aggressively help that candidate beat McCallum. The chances of a McCallum endorsement? “Slim and none,” said one insider, noting that WEAC’s top leaders are Democrats and that many of them every four years are delegates to the Democratic National Convention. In addition, some of WEAC’s top locals are aggressively Democratic. And at the top of that list is Madison Teachers Inc., led by John Matthews. Matthews told the Madison weekly *Isthmus* recently that the fate of public education rests with the results of the fall election. “We’re on the road to mediocrity. How can we remedy this problem? Elect a new governor,” Matthews said.

An endorsement of McCallum or a position of neutrality would tear the union apart and result in locals going their own way in a full-scale revolt, some union watchers have ventured in explaining why WEAC will revert to form after it gets what it wants out of the budget. “Once the budget is done, it’s a different game,” said one union ally. “In the end, they’ll go full bore for the Democrat.”

But how did the union get to the point where it publicly even talks about the possibility of endorsing the Republican governor? It's been an evolutionary process, say WEAC insiders, driven by pragmatic politics and the motivation to do what it takes to further the interests of its members. And that often means dealing with traditional foes who are in power.

It started when Andrews left the union to help Feingold in his victorious 1992 Senate run. That roughly coincided with the departure of another longtime lobbyist, Michael Brennan. Then came the 1993 special Senate elections in which Republicans captured two out of three open seats and took control of the state Senate; only one of the candidates backed by WEAC and allied unions, Joe Wineke of Verona, won. Later that year, the hated revenue caps and QEO became law as conservative Democrats broke away, pressured in part by the public's acceptance of Thompson's long campaign against the state's arbitration law and teacher compensation.

The political dynamics were changing. Bill Clinton was in the White House, but Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich was on the move. And in Wisconsin, Thompson and Republicans were on the rise. Scott Jensen, Thompson's former chief of staff and campaign manager, was in the state Assembly after a narrow 1992 special election victory over the WEAC-endorsed candidate; with his help Assembly Republicans would two years later take control of the state Assembly.

The union had to adjust after years of working in an environment where Democrats held firm control of the Legislature. WEAC's Capitol lobbying team, now on the defensive, quickly built relationships with Senate

Majority Leader Michael Ellis, R-Neenah, and other key Senate Republicans, including Dale Schultz and Brian Rude. Those relationships helped soften the political blows of those years. Teachers in a way took the bullet for all public employees, becoming the only public-sector workers to have their salaries limited by state law.

While the Senate switched back and forth over the next several elections, Assembly Republicans — now under Speaker Scott Jensen — strengthened their majority. That's when WEAC went the pragmatic route again, this time backing Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Chvala to help Democrats gain firm

control of that house. Senate Democrats now would be the goalie, blocking anti-education proposals from the governor and the Assembly.

It was in this environment that WEAC and its allies found some traction on the issue of small-class sizes. SAGE, the program created in 1995 that promoted small class sizes in poor schools, became a rallying cry for pro-WEAC Democrats. And with the budget flush with revenues, SAGE

became the kind of pro-education initiative that Republicans like Thompson and Jensen could support as part of a national GOP effort to co-opt suburban swing voters interested in education. Republicans generally fought Democrats on the size of SAGE, not the concept. SAGE also became the issue that helped forge an alliance between WEAC and the Republican-leaning Wisconsin Realtors Association (WRA). In short, the Realtors believe that good schools, good neighborhoods and good property values go hand in hand. The two big lobbying groups held a SAGE conference in Milwaukee, and Jensen and Chvala were recognized for their efforts.

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In the late 1990s, WEAC — playing pragmatic politics again — concentrated its efforts on holding the Feingold seat and the state Senate. WEAC learned to live with Thompson as speculation mounted that he might leave someday if a Republican president were elected. WEAC and Thompson, for example, worked together in 1999 to put into law the largest public employee pension improvement in Wisconsin history.

When McCallum became governor in February 2001, WEAC adjusted again. The relationships with the Realtors and Republican legislators helped it enhance its relationship with McCallum. But WEAC officials were still stunned when McCallum called them to a meeting early in 2002 and gave them the news that K-12 education would remain untouched in his budget except for a cap on school aid for construction costs.

How could they not respond favorably? Even if the governor's move was largely a political calculation (top WEAC officials believe him to be sincere), he still was proposing something that would benefit its members. It was proof that the Great Schools campaign had paid off. So WEAC's Stan Johnson stood with McCallum in support of the K-12 provisions, while other public employee unions screamed that the governor's shared revenue cuts were unfair.

Meanwhile, the alliance with Realtors, built on personal relationships between top

officials in the organizations, has extended to issues like campaign finance reform and now the two-thirds education fix.

WEAC also is working with Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC), the big business lobby, though not as closely as with the Realtors. Johnson, the WEAC president, paid a courtesy visit to the WMC board of directors earlier this year. And in a recent WMC newsletter, a top WMC official, James R. Morgan, wrote: "WMC and WEAC members are working together to provide a better education for Wisconsin students. . . . It is wise for companies to remember that the teachers who are teaching their employees' children are probably WEAC members. In the same light, educators should not forget their companies creating jobs and the tax base to support schools and teachers are probably WMC and local chamber members."

Major interest groups seem to be speaking the same rhetoric when it comes to education. But in this election season, WEAC likely will be on opposite sides of WRA and WMC in many races, including the governor's race. Will the good will on education survive? Influential insiders predict the relationships forged in this early post-Thompson era will prevail when it comes to crafting education policy in the 2003-05 budget. To paraphrase that old car commercial, this isn't your father's WEAC. Then again, the old WEAC never had to deal with a political year like 2002.