

January 12, 2010

President Weingarten:

We, the undersigned, are writing to inform you of some disturbing remarks made by your affiliate, California Federation of Teachers, and its President, Marty Hittelman, in reference to public school parents in California.

Given Mr. Hittelman's public refusal to recant or apologize for his or his organization's incredibly offensive words, we are calling upon you and the American Federation of Teachers to denounce Mr. Hittelman's comments.

Just last week, California passed its "Race to the Top" reform legislation in an attempt to improve our public schools and qualify for \$700 million in federal grants. A key part of this legislation is a provision called the "Parent Trigger," which would empower parents to successfully demand significant reforms at their child's local school – essentially the same right that California teachers are already afforded. If a California school is federally designated as "failing" and 51% of parents demanded a certain change, the local education agency (LEA) is required to make it, including in-District reconstitution or transformation by a charter operator. There are also built in checks and balances, as the LEA is empowered to provide a different reform if they find it unfeasible or unwise to implement the parents' request.

The January 5 edition of Inside CFT, the organization's official newsletter, referred to this provision explicitly as a "lynch mob provision." Civil rights organizations such as National Action Network, Los Angeles immediately demanded an apology, and noted the offensiveness of referring to parents – mostly black and Latino – fighting to improve their children's school as a "lynch mob." But rather than simply apologize and move on, Mr. Hittelman strongly defended this characterization, stating that "basically what they're [parents] doing is lynching the school and all the teachers..."

As a group of religious leaders wrote when asking for an apology, "'Lynch Mob' conjures up visions of a sinister tool wielded by the Night Riders, the Ku Klux Klan, and other bigots. It's a violent, brutal effort on the part of others to keep Blacks down economically, socially, and any other way conceivable." Such blatant disrespect towards parents from an elected president of an organization that those same parents trust to educate their children is extremely disturbing. It is even more bothersome coming from an affiliate of AFT, which under your leadership has proven itself as a leader in exploring education reform policies that work for both our children and their teachers. Furthermore, given the long struggle of organized labor to pass the Employee Free Choice Act and empower 51% of workers through signing a petition, surely there can be sympathy for parents who desire that same right.

We can all respectfully disagree on issues of public policy and how to best improve public education. But we cannot work together for the change we need when people such as Mr. Hittelman hold parents in such contempt, and sink to using racially charged language to demean them.

Ultimately, we believe that far more unites than divides us as parents and teachers for one simple reason: because it's impossible to have a great school without great teachers. We believe that we all must eventually march together in the long journey to transform public education. If we can't agree on a common agenda today, we understand. But if we can't treat each other as current partners, we can at least treat each other as future partners. We can disagree on policy without denigrating our character with racial slurs and hyperbolic insults.

As parents, we will take back and transform our schools with or without you because we have no choice. We only get one chance to give our children a great education. And parents now have historic power under California law to transform our schools simply through community organizing. Neither Mr. Hittelman, nor anyone else, can stop us. But we also know that we're a whole lot more likely to succeed if we march together. So let us try. Let us take that first step -- which is to acknowledge that we are no more a "lynch mob," than the 51 percent of teachers who triggered the transformation of Locke High School, or the hundreds of thousands of union members across America who have improved their working conditions and their lives through a "card check" trigger. We are simply parents who love our children, who will fight by any means necessary to give them the education they need and the future they deserve.

We thank you for your leadership, courage and vision, and again call on you to condemn these hateful remarks.

Sincerely,

Shirley Ford, Parent Revolution

Reverend K.W. Tulloss, National Action Network, Los Angeles

Reverend Eric Lee, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Los Angeles

Carolynn Martin, National Council of Negro Women, View Park Section

Lois La Blance, WB Community Learning Center

Fernando Espuelas, Café Espuelas

Families in Schools