

Unlikely Allies Uniting to Fight School Changes

SMYRNA, Tenn. — She is a fan of MSNBC, supports abortion rights and increased government spending in schools, and believes unions should have the right to strike. He watches Fox News, opposes abortion and is a fiscal conservative who voted three years ago to strip teachers unions of collective bargaining rights.

Yet Emily Mitchell, a wiry, 4-foot-9-inch Democrat and first-grade teacher at David Youree Elementary School here, sees State [Representative Rick Womick](#), a 6-foot-2-inch conservative Republican, as an important ally. Their common cause: battling new high-stakes standardized tests and some other hot-button policies in public education.

“I always viewed him as the enemy, the guy that would never see our side,” said Ms. Mitchell, who is president of the Rutherford County chapter of the Tennessee Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union. But after she met Mr. Womick at a church function in February of last year, she said, “I realized that even though he’s polar opposite politically from what I believe in, we both agreed on a lot of things on education.”

With tensions running high over issues surrounding academic benchmarks, standardized testing and performance evaluations for educators, unlikely coalitions of teachers, lawmakers and parents from the left and right are increasingly banding together to push back against what they see as onerous changes in education policy. Some have Tea Party Republicans and teachers unions on the same side.

In Oklahoma, teachers unions gave strong support to a bill, sponsored by Republicans, that would overturn a law requiring third graders to be held back simply on the basis of the results of one standardized test. (Last week, that coalition helped the Legislature overturn Gov. Mary Fallin’s veto.)

In New Jersey, a bill that would slow down the introduction of the Common Core education standards and the use of test scores in teacher evaluations passed the Assembly Education Committee with rare unanimous support. And in New York, grass-roots opposition on the left and the right to testing and the Common Core, a set of national reading and math standards for elementary, middle and high school students that have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia, led legislators to delay the consequences of standardized tests for students last month.

“The major narrative right now for people working in American politics and public policy is hyper partisanship,” said Patrick McGuinn, an associate professor of political science at Drew University. With education, he said, “the coalitions are much more complicated.”

During the most recent legislative session in Tennessee, conservative Republicans, including Mr. Womick, joined the teachers union in supporting a bill to delay the administration of a standardized test aligned to the [Common Core](#). Conservative lawmakers also sponsored a bill, co-written by the teachers union, that overturned a State Board of Education policy tying decisions about teacher licenses to student test scores.

“We don’t look at the abortion issues or Fox News,” Mr. Womick said on a recent visit to David Youree Elementary, where he greeted Ms. Mitchell with a hug. “All we’re looking at is education in Tennessee.”

Of course, not everyone is opposed to the recent changes. Despite the populist furor, support for the Common Core, for example, has largely held up among educators and legislators.

These unlikely partnerships in opposition mirror alliances that formed to introduce the contentious policies in the first place. Centrist Democrats — including those in the Obama administration — lined up with moderate Republicans and business leaders to promote the new standards, teacher evaluations and updated standardized tests.

As in any marriage of opposites, fissures could emerge after the initial passion fades.

“I think it’s an uneasy coalition,” Mary Holden, a high school English teacher in Nashville, said of the new allies from the right. “I think their endgame is different. I mean great, they don’t want Common Core, but what else do they want?”

While conservatives support teachers unions in their efforts to slow down the linkage of testing and performance reviews, policy makers and advocates on the right tend to push for the expansion of charter schools and taxpayer vouchers for private schools, measures that teacher groups regard more warily.

Even in areas of overlap, motives differ. Critics on the left are most concerned about the high stakes attached to the Common Core and the affiliated standardized tests, while opponents on the right do not want national standards at all. They argue that the Obama administration’s support of the Common Core or similar standards has led to a de facto federal edict.

And where lawmakers on the right in several states have sought to repeal adoption of the Common Core altogether — as the Indiana legislature did in April — teachers unions generally have stopped short of supporting such measures.

Nevertheless, odd alliances have been fueled by what experts describe as an unprecedented amount of policy change jammed into a short time period.

As governor in Tennessee in 2010, [Philip Bredesen](#), a Democrat, shepherded the state’s adoption of the Common Core and new teacher evaluations to qualify for a \$500 million federal grant from the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program. His successor,

Gov. Bill Haslam, a Republican, who supports the programs, said the current resistance was an inevitable response to rapid change.

“I think that all of us would say that this isn’t something that you decide to take at a very moderate pace,” Mr. Haslam said.

When Tennessee applied for the Race to the Top grant, the teachers union signed on in support of the Common Core and committed teachers to the new evaluations and tests.

Some teachers said they had reservations from the start. “We’re not going to look at what’s inside the Trojan horse,” said Lucianna Sanson, an English teacher at Franklin County High School in Winchester, Tenn. “We’re just going to look at the horse and say how pretty it is. My first instinct was that this was going to be bad, and the more I learned about it, the worse it got.”

The unexpected alliances appeal to teachers and parents, at least in part, because many felt shut out of the process and were looking for partners.

Over the past three years, Kevin Huffman, Tennessee’s commissioner of education, pursued other policies that worried teachers, including tightening tenure eligibility and reducing the number of potential raises in the salary schedule, which had traditionally awarded raises for advanced degrees and years of service.

“There was this piling on with this series of punitive policies that were effectively designed to punish teachers,” said [Will Pinkston](#), who was an aide to Mr. Bredesen when he was governor and is now a member of the Nashville school board.

In an interview in Nashville, Mr. Huffman said the changes had brought results, pointing [to a rise in Tennessee student scores](#) on federal tests. Of the opposition to new policies, he said, “To me that’s more part of the national union leadership effort to avoid accountability at all costs.”

Gera Summerford, president of the Tennessee Education Association, called Mr. Huffman’s comments insulting.

Ms. Summerford said the union supported accountability, but questioned some of the methods being used to rate teachers.

Similarly, some parents say they feel that their concerns are dismissed out of hand. “What is striking to me is the response from the Department of Education officials to any push back or criticism is ‘Shut up, you don’t know what you are talking about,’ ” said Anne-Marie Farmer, a mother of two elementary school students in Nashville and a member of [Tennesseans Reclaiming Educational Excellence](#), a parent advocacy group.

Some educators worry that the delay in implementing a new test and uncertainty about the Common Core leave them in limbo.

Others are pressing on. One recent morning at Gower Elementary School in Nashville, Cynthia Kirkpatrick led her first graders in a series of word problems. More than a third of her students are learning English as a second language, and several receive services for learning disabilities.

During the lesson, which built on the Common Core standards, the children highlighted important numbers and phrases, drew pictures to illustrate their thinking and wrote math equations.

Ms. Kirkpatrick said the politics surrounding education policy could “make you take your eye off the ball,” but, she added, gesturing around the classroom, “what’s important is who is in here with me.”

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