



How the National Teachers Union Usurped a Local Election

And how you paid for it.

by John J. Newkirk

Jeffco at a Glance

Student Enrollment: 83,512

Employees: 13,585

2015 Budget: \$1.02 billion

Average Teacher Compensation¹:
\$70,986 per year

Teacher Effectiveness Rating²:
98% effective

Student College/Career Readiness³:

Math: 48%

Science: 46%

Reading: 48%

¹ Includes salary, retirement, and healthcare benefits

² Per a joint administration/union teacher evaluation rubric

³ Based on 2015 ACT college and career readiness benchmarks

In November of 2013, the people of Jefferson County, Colorado elected me to represent their interests on the Board of Education. My goal was ambitious, but straightforward: help turn our 83,000 student school district, where I attended elementary through high school, into the nation's leader in public education. But with **one out of two** Jeffco graduates rated "not ready" for college or career in basic **math, science, and reading** skills, I knew this goal would require equally ambitious reforms from our five-member board, including **accountability in teacher performance**, fairness in **student funding**, broader **choices for parents**, and **transparency** in policy governance.

As it so happened, two other reform-minded candidates also won their elections, thereby creating — for the first time in recent memory — a Jeffco board majority that was not supported by the teachers union. The union's reaction was swift, and as they freely admit, efforts to unseat the newly elected board majority began "**the moment the polls closed in 2013.**" Jefferson County thus became the focus of the **largest labor union** in the United States: the **National Education Association** and its **local affiliates**.

“We organize, we organize, we organize!”



Union organizer Scott Kwasny spent years targeting Detroit area schools before being reassigned to Colorado

The **unions** promptly sent in a **full-time organizer** from Detroit, forty-eight **embedded operatives** from eighteen states, as well as a **specialist** to help coordinate “blitzes, marches, rallies, and other direct actions,” all intended to **agitate and disrupt** our community. A Seattle-based **strategies firm** was hired to “beat these [conservative] **b—stards**,” and children were **encouraged by their teachers** to walk out of classes in **protest**. My daughter’s school was marked up with **hate graffiti**, our board meetings were constantly interrupted by **bellicose catcalls**, and on more than one occasion we required police escorts to and from our cars. Those listening to union talking points began to believe the new board was taking the district to hell in a handbasket, though the facts told a far different story.

Somehow, amidst this noise, our board majority managed to move forward and take on a number of tough, long-neglected **challenges**. We initiated meaningful improvements in **student achievement**, **pay for performance**, **student data privacy**, **school choice**, and **minority issues**. We resurrected Jeffco’s innovative building **trades** program. We **raised teacher compensation** by 8% and authorized 1600 new seats in **three new schools** without new taxes or debt. Under our leadership, **cash reserves increased** by \$55 million, debt **decreased** by \$54 million, and **teacher turnover rates** beat the state average by 12%. **Graduation rates increased**, **dropout rates decreased**, test scores **ticked up**, and after over a decade of declining enrollment, our student population **began to grow again**.

Opponents of the board majority did not hesitate to exploit children in their push to regain control



Release the Kraken!

Ignoring this upward trajectory, a group calling itself Jeffco United began an aggressive campaign to **intimidate**, **disparage**, and **overthrow** the new board while emphatically insisting that it was a “**parent driven**, grassroots” effort. “**The union is not behind this**,” they claimed, as dozens of **paid signature gatherers** disingenuously assured petition signers that a recall election wouldn’t “**cost the district anything**.” Their campaign of contradictions was wildly successful, and Jeffco’s duly elected Board of Education was ousted midterm and replaced by a single, unified slate of five union designees.



The Truth Comes Out

What Jeffco United celebrated as a triumph of the people was condemned by the **Denver Post**, which wrote the recall was firmly based on “falsehoods.” The local **NBC news affiliate** issued an unprecedented on-the-air apology for its role in misleading voters, and Colorado Government Watch filed an **ethics complaint** with the Secretary of State.

A Colorado court ruled that the recall organizers had **broken the law**. Jeffco United was fined and forced to disclose its source of funding, compelling founders **Wendy McCord** and **Michael Blanton**, via their **professional publicist**, to grudgingly confess that **99%** of the group’s financing came from labor unions.

Flush with victory, the new leadership proposed a **\$5 million post-recall bonus** to teachers and staff (cynically criticized as paying off an “**election bribe**”) along with **\$53 million in new debt**. Adding insult to injury, the district found itself staring at a bill of nearly a **quarter million dollars** to cover the cost of an untimely election forced by the teachers union — all paid for by your federal, state, and local tax dollars.

The Immoral of the Story

A recent study by the **Josephson Institute** reveals that **51%** of students now believe lying and cheating are acceptable means of achieving a goal. This statistic becomes all the more understandable when considering the unblushing dishonesty demonstrated by the teachers union in their desperate quest to cling to power in Jefferson County, Colorado.

Honesty, character, and integrity are every bit as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic in the education of our future leaders. The National Education Association’s no holds barred, win at all costs mentality not only sets a profoundly poor example for our students, it is conduct unbecoming of America. Civil discourse is good. Deliberate deception is bad. But **exploiting children** for political purposes is nothing short of despicable.

One way to disabuse good people of a bad idea (and granting absolute power to any single, factional slate is a *very* bad idea) is to give them exactly what they asked for, then sit back and watch the inevitable train wreck. In the case of our children, however, we cannot and should not tolerate this. As America slides toward 30th in **global academic achievement**, as the **Chinese yuan** threatens to replace the U.S. dollar as the world’s reserve currency, and as our country imports more and more of its **skilled labor**, we cannot be satisfied with the ignominious reassurance that we’re still above average.

For better or worse, this is not Our Fathers’ America®. We live in a world of high technology and increasing globalization and our children need to be prepared for it. If they are to inherit the freedom and prosperity so dearly purchased by those who came before us, we must heed the words spoken by our **16th President**: “As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country.”

John J. Newkirk served on the Jefferson County Board of Education from 2013 - 2015

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