



WEA pays the price for ignoring the law

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Maybe the Washington Education Association will finally take the hint that ignoring a law it doesn't like won't make it go away. The public school employees' union would have a much healthier bank account if it ever decided to play by the rules.

Thurston County Superior Court Judge Gary Tabor fined the union \$400,000 Tuesday for intentionally ignoring a state law governing the use of fees paid by people the union represented.

According to Tabor, the union spent the money paid by "agency fee payers" (teachers who aren't union members) on political campaigns without first getting their permission. This violated a 1992 voter-approved initiative - bitterly opposed by organized labor - that restricted the way unions raise money for political purposes. The law requires unions to get permission from fee payers before using their money for political activities.

Tabor also ordered the WEA to pay court costs and the legal fees of the state attorney general's office, which brought the case against the union. The extra expenses could bring the union's final bill to well over \$500,000.

The union's financial hemorrhaging may not stop there. A group of school employees is reportedly pursuing a class action lawsuit against the WEA seeking reimbursement for the union's political use of their fees without their permission. A judgment against the WEA could cost the union up to \$2 million.

What's amazing about this setback for the WEA is that the union's leadership seems to have learned nothing from a past legal defeat. This isn't the first time the WEA has run afoul of the same law. In 1998, state Attorney General Christine Gregoire sued the union for illegally collecting dues and failing to report their use in helping defeat initiatives for charter schools and school vouchers to the state Public Disclosure Commission. The evidence against the union was strong, and it settled the lawsuit for \$430,000 - a record at the time.

These significant losses should be of great concern to the union's rank-and-file members, who should be able to make the connection between the losses and practices that are now illegal, whether the union likes it or not. It's up to union members to ask the hard questions of their leaders and to insist that they implement policies and practices that adhere to the law - or find other leaders who are willing to do so.



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