

# Independent Local Education Associations

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<http://www.educationnews.org/independent-local-education-asso.htm>

At least three state three teacher unions - Georgia, Texas and Missouri - are larger than state affiliates of either the National Education Association (NEA) or American Federation of Teachers (AFT). While the existence of these state groups is little known, independent local teacher associations (ILEAs) are virtually invisible. Most are in Ohio and Indiana. Some are typical unions but others reject both traditional union ways and tactics.

The 2,000-member Akron Education Association, the largest independent, was unified with the Ohio Education Association (OEA) and the NEA while that was voluntary but it became independent in 1978, after the NEA began requiring unified membership. Even with dues less than \$150, compared to the \$600 teachers may pay in total local-state-national dues in a unified group, its budget provided for full-time officers and other advantages that come from self-determination of its policies and actions. Its president, Bill Seigferth, has said that, "a strong local has little need for the clout of the state and national union, and the clout of the state and national union can do little to help a weak local."

But independence is practical for smaller units as well. Like Akron, the Kent Education Association was a unified NEA affiliate until after that became a requirement, becoming independent in 1981. Despite lower dues it maintains a sizable reserve legal defense fund and provides many services more economically than the unified associations.

Where, for example, the NEA and the AFT may spend a million dollars annually for their research divisions, plus additional expensive staffing at the state level, the Kent EA rents computer services as needed from nearby Kent State University. It has reportedly spent as little as \$200 a year for their occasional need for information. While the Akron EA may be correctly defined as a union, because it has gone on strike and requires non-members to pay an agency fee, the Kent EA does neither. Believing, like most independent associations, in voluntary membership, its president, Donna Hess, said "We get our members the old fashioned way; we earn them."

There are other independent locals in Ohio, such as in Solon, while in adjoining Indiana, ten of the 200 school districts have autonomous local education groups.

A major addition to these ranks may be in the offing. In New York a merger between the state AFT and the much smaller NEA affiliate is being proposed. The largest NEA local, the 3500-member Buffalo Teachers Federation not only opposes the merger but its president, Philip Rumore, has said if the merger goes through he will attempt to have his local become independent. As such it would be the largest in the nation and perhaps give some impetus to others who could similarly profit by standing on their own.

A major reason for such a move, especially for NEA affiliates, is the present dues structure. The largest amount tends to flow to the state level, the second largest to the national, and by far the fewest dollars remain in the local's treasury. Since, as Akron EA president Seigferth has noted, the most important functions occur locally, that's where most of the money should be retained. With local independence all of it remains there. Even if the dues are reduced to one-fourth their present levels the total available locally is much greater.

Independence, even if coupled with voluntary membership and rejection of union tactics such as the strike and agency fees, does not preclude the local group from negotiating for its membership which, at least under the present public school system, is probably something that few teachers will want to avoid entirely. Such laws do not require a local group to have any other affiliations in order to bargain for its members.

Industrial unions need to be part of a national union because corporations are that large. But each of the nation's 14,000+ school districts is independent and there are advantages if the local teachers organization are too.

National teacher unions have individual staffers earning more than \$100,000 annually paid for by dues from teachers in local districts. An independent teacher group in an average district with about 200 teachers can function effectively for much less than that per year.

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*"...non-union teacher organizations exist in each of the 50 states...the Coalition of Independent Education Associations (CIEA) emphasizes professional development and places a top priority on providing children the best possible education." Charlene Haar, "How Much Longer Will You Pay the NEA?", p. 5, Report Card, January/February 1996*