

# **Presentation to the Board of Education**

**Public Participation—October 23, 2006**

**Valley Central Teachers' Association**

The VCTA is here tonight to show its solidarity for the Valley Central community. Our school community is comprised of

- first and foremost, our students and their parents;
- our local residents, both property owners and renters;
- each and every Valley Central employee, regardless of his/her title, bargaining unit affiliation or lack thereof; and
- this Board of Education that has been elected to fairly represent all of the previously noted school community groups.

Just as we strive to keep the VCTA's logo—*Putting Children Center*—at the heart of all of our activities, we also strive to keep the VCTA's union philosophy at the heart of our community and school activism. We VCTA teachers are not here tonight to lobby on behalf of ourselves, but rather to lobby on behalf of our co-workers and fellow community members.

Unionism is first and foremost about unity, support and fairness. For the VCTA to apply these standards exclusively to itself without regard to other workers would dishonor the very meaning and intent of union membership and activism. Who among us would ignore a cry for help from our neighbor if there was an intruder in our neighbor's home? Perhaps some would ignore a neighbor's cry for help, ignoring the plight of their neighbor and the rest of the world as long as nothing directly impacted their cozy corner of it. Most, however, would empathize with their neighbor's plight, reacting with compassion and honor. Although this is not necessarily indicative of capitalism, it is certainly indicative of democracy and community. And it is most certainly indicative of the very nature of the union movement. Capitalism should never negate the benefits inherent in democracy and community—benefits for which many Americans have fought and died.

Strong communities are held together by caring families; in fact, without these caring families, there would be no community. VCTA members stand here tonight in support of our family. Members of our Valley Central family have been excluded from the “dinner table:” the custodial and maintenance workers, paraprofessionals and food service providers. We are not blind to the fact that different benefits are inherent in different job titles; however, we are also not blind to the fact that school districts across this nation are adopting a Wal-Mart philosophy when it comes to dealing with certain members of its community. This is not productive and it is certainly not representative of a healthy community with strong family ties. These are **our** family members. They each perform an essential role within our community. These are our brothers and sisters. Are they your family as well? Or is your family more exclusive than inclusive?

Why are the paraprofessional and maintenance workers disillusioned with their work experience here at Valley Central? After decades of working as independent, stand alone bargaining units, unrepresented by state and national affiliates, why would other bargaining units or unrepresented units wish to join the VCTA? We certainly do not know for certain that their addition to our contractual recognition clause would benefit these groups in a significant practical manner—the paraprofessionals are currently members of NYSUT and the VCTA. We do know, however, that emotional support has a value all of its own and that this emotional support is what often holds families together when they may feel powerless in face of their future.

I would like to read you the wise words of a local author—an individual I have come to know over the past four (4) years. He said:

“Power is embedded in institutions: legislatures, courts but also in education professions that categorize humans with labels and make them submissive

subjects who must at least appear to accept the labels and the rules of those who control and manage them...Power is revealed through its backlash and resistance...Thus leaders need a particular sensitivity in using power.” (Marshall and Hooley, p. 155)

Backlash and resistance are words often used to characterize unions in a negative light. Unions were not born from a desire to hurt employers, managers or institutions. Unions were born out of a desire for workers to be heard. The most effective way for workers to achieve this goal is to speak with one unified voice. Historically, unions have protected working men and women. Members of our family and community should be able to work and live here with the expectation of providing an honest day’s work in exchange for a decent and competitive wage and benefits package—one that enables them to feed and clothe their families—one that enables them to take their loved ones to a doctor when they are sick—one that enables them to avoid eligibility for free or reduced school lunches for their children.

The VCTA has come here tonight to stand in solidarity with other members of our Valley Central family—to demonstrate that we value all members of our community. Vince Lombardi once said it is “individual commitment to a group effort—that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” We would add that individual commitment to a group effort also makes a school district work. These members of our family are certainly committed to our district. But, how long will that commitment last if these members feel marginalized?

We will not speak to specific issues with regard to these units in this public forum. We would be happy to speak directly to this BOE in executive session with regard to our specific concerns. In closing, however, we would like to reaffirm our commitment to family and community with two final points:

1. First: As our mission statement reads—*There are no greater advocates for children and education than teachers and teacher unions.* The VCTA sees one of its roles as watchdog to guard the future of this district in which we have invested so much of ourselves. We feel it necessary to address you tonight to speak to you about the value of all members of this community and the need to attend to all members with respect and dignity.
2. Second—I would once again like to quote our local author: “Deeper problems arise when...power arrangements promote privilege or discriminate unfairly. We assert that schools are bureaucracies that promote fairness and provide equity of access to the “goodies” of society. However, some powerful practices use policies and structures in ways that restrict access, cut off opportunity, and maintain privilege. The disempowered and silenced are kept that way, raising “serious questions about the role of schools in the social and cultural reproduction of social classes...” (Marshall and Hooley, pp. 155-156)

Our former students make up a large portion of our working staff. What values are we modeling if our former students and current employees perceive the existence of an institutional caste system within our own family and community?

#### Works Cited

Marshall, Catherine and Richard M. Hooley. *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Corwin Press. 2006.