

Misuse of Public Tax Dollars by Menlo Park Academy Charter School

Charter schools are beginning to unionize. The March 25 article by Dr. Tanisha Pruitt provides information about the misuse of public tax dollars by the management of the Menlo Park Academy charter school. The management of the charter used tax funds to fight the drive of teachers to form a union.

In the article it is noted that the union forming issue is before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), which has jurisdiction in private sector union activities. In Ohio, the State Employment Relations Board (SERB) deals with public collective bargaining issues.

It is curious that NLRB is dealing with the bargaining issue at Menlo Park Academy; NLRB officials must believe that charters are private entities.

So, are charters public or private? Charters are public in that they receive public funds. In all other respects, they are private.

Cleveland charter school uses public dollars to fight union drive Public funds should be used for the public good, not union busting Tanisha Pruitt, Ph.D.

Teachers at [Menlo Park Academy](#) come to work every day to shape the minds and inspire the dreams of young Clevelanders. They are in the middle of a union drive at the privately operated, publicly funded charter school, which serves gifted students in grades K-8. Management is fighting them every inch of the way.

The use of public funds for charter schools in Ohio already undermines Ohio's public education system. The state is spending hundreds of millions on privately run charter schools and asking for little accountability in return. That's how scandals like the [ECOT debacle](#) can take root. The for-profit online charter school [took millions in public money by overinflating enrollment numbers](#).

When charter schools siphon public funds, public schools have less state funding for books, technology, facility upgrades and teacher pay. Meanwhile, more state money goes to private interests. It's even more damaging when a charter school's management uses those funds to fight teachers' right to speak up together through a union.

Ohio lawmakers continue to spend more public funds on charter schools each year, committing an all-time high of nearly \$1 billion in budget year 2020-2021. Menlo Park alone received over \$4 million. Charters — like all schools — received federal funds through the COVID response legislation, with Menlo Park receiving close to \$1 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding as well as Paycheck Protection Program funding. As a primarily publicly funded school, Menlo has a responsibility to use funds for education, and to be an ethical employer.

Instead, management is using some of the funding to fight the union drive. In November, [96%](#) of Menlo's educators signed union cards that were filed with the National

Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for a secret-ballot union election. Management refused to voluntarily recognize the union and hired a high-price antiunion lawyer to delay the election. Their tactics didn't work, however. Just last week, the NLRB ruled against management said it does have jurisdiction over the Menlo Park union election. The educators will vote on March 30.

Management's legal challenge only wasted more time and cost the school more money that could have been used to educate children. Deb Vandrasik, a 4th and 5th grade teacher at Menlo Park, said that teachers need books, chairs, and desks. "But now they are spending thousands of dollars to try to bust our union," she said.

No publicly funded entity should spend money on union-busting, but it's especially egregious when nearly all employees support the drive and when the money is intended to be spent educating children.

Menlo Park teachers say they [want a voice](#) in decisions that directly affect them and the students they serve. Their work to create consistency and sustainability in their classrooms has been undercut by the lack of accountability for board members and school leaders, which leads to high turnover. Menlo Park teachers are paid, on average, \$40,612 a year compared to teachers in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District who are paid \$53,498 on average, according to Glassdoor.com. Both groups of educators are being paid well below their worth, which is contributing to [low teacher supply](#) in the state. Teachers need stability, so they can have the resources and support they need to be able to effectively teach their students; most believe unionizing is the only way.

"We are forming a union because the learning environment in the school is chaotic and unstable, [teachers feel unsupported](#) and lack basic necessities such as supplies and consistent curriculum," said Beth Turk, an intervention specialist at Menlo Park.

Educators at Menlo Park Academy are disheartened by the hesitation and lack of support from the board and school leaders, especially after hearing of the [recent success](#) of unionizing at Summit Academy Secondary Lorain. Summit Academy Secondary Lorain filed for an election the same day as Menlo Park Academy but their election was completed by Jan. 14th, becoming the eighth charter school to join the Cleveland ACTS union.

If successful in forming a union, teachers at Menlo Park Academy will have more input in decision-making, a reduction in teacher and staff turnover, and will be able to provide more stability and sustainability for their students. Menlo Park Academy leadership should not be spending public resources on this frivolous anti-union campaign, instead, funds should be used to benefit students and improve educational outcomes of all students regardless of their zip code or what they look like to build a brighter future for Ohio.

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