

The Pueblo Chieftain

Group takes on local teacher unions



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES This billboard on U.S. 50 alerts teachers of the upcoming deadline to opt out of the Pueblo Education Association and the Pueblo County Education Association.

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A Denver public policy research group is targeting the local teachers unions with a campaign aimed at getting teachers to opt out of the associations.

The Independence Institute has placed a billboard on U.S. 50 East alerting teachers of the upcoming deadline to opt out of the Pueblo Education Association and the Pueblo County Education Association.

The billboard in bold letters states “Not Fair for Pueblo Teachers!” and informs teachers they have until Sept. 15 to opt out of the unions or face paying \$700 or more in association fees throughout the year.

The advertisement gives a website for teachers to access for more information about employee freedom.

Ben DeGrow, senior education policy analyst for the institute, said the campaign is promoting the fact that Pueblo

City Schools (D60) and Pueblo County District 70 teachers have the option to choose whether to join a union.

“They should be able to do that freely,” De-Grow said Tuesday of teachers joining unions.

“Pueblo (D60 and District 70) has a particularly egregious policy to require nonunion members to file a letter each year to opt out by Sept. 15.”

Teachers who don’t file a letter to opt out by the deadline are required to pay dues for the year, DeGrow said.

“Only a handful of school districts have that type of opt-out and Pueblo’s districts are among them,” he said.

Leaders of the local teachers’ unions said the campaign is aimed at public education, not contract language.

“The Independence Institute’s goal is to destroy public education and to make sure the system becomes totally charters,” said Suzanne Ethredge, PEA president.

Roxy Pignanelli, PCEA president, said the institute is “desperately trying to create unrest where they can.”

“They know Pueblo is a union town and people rely on what the unions provide in a living wage,” she said. “That’s a huge attack on a community that relies on a decent living wage by virtue of unions.”

Pignanelli and Ethredge said they’re not concerned the institute’s message will affect association membership.

“The contract language has been in both contracts for 30 years. It’s good, strong union language,” Ethredge said.

“Pueblo, Colorado, is still a strong union city. It’s part of our heritage and culture.”

Pignanelli said PCEA’s membership numbers are so high the opt-out affects only a few employees.

“People can revoke and get out,” Pignanelli said.