

EDUCATION COMMENTARY

Helping 200 Teachers Abandon Indiana's Largest Teachers Union

Tony Kinnett / @TheTonus January 30, 2023

 COMMENTARY BY

Tony Kinnett @TheTonus

Tony Kinnett is an investigative columnist for The Daily Signal.

On Dec. 20, I helped my 200th teacher leave the Indiana State Teachers Association. This behemoth of a pyramid scheme charges Indiana teachers \$1,000 per year to lobby for progressive political goals at the state and national level—while claiming to be integral in salary negotiation and legal defense.

Over the last five years, I've enjoyed the privilege of assisting teachers in navigating past the smoke and mirrors to leave the scam masquerading as an essential service for teachers. While the ISTA continues to lament teacher wages in the Indiana Statehouse, it siphons money from the salaries of teachers who gain nothing of value from the transaction.

I'll never forget the first time I heard a sales pitch from the ISTA. I had just taken a science teaching position at Knightstown Intermediate School in Knightstown, Indiana, and after a lengthy safety briefing from the superintendent, a representative from the ISTA walked up to the front of the high school cafeteria and began to speak.

However, the droning speech wasn't what cemented the memory forever in my mind—but the response from Knightstown staff. In her opening, the ISTA representative claimed, "The Indiana State Teachers Association provides essential services for all Indiana teachers that make our classrooms a better place!"

The collective chuckling and scorning that ensued from a large faction of teachers caught both the representative and me off guard. I had previously believed that the ISTA had a strong footing in Indiana, and though I wasn't interested in joining the union, the vast majority of other public school teachers held it in high esteem.

This laughter shook a few who were returning to the district for their second or third year, having fallen for the pitch in previous years and simply renewed their dues. Two weeks later, I was standing with one of those teachers in the hallway after classes had ended for the day—taking part in the age-old tradition of after-school quibbling.

My colleague expressed her frustration about the ISTA taking money out of her paycheck biweekly, and about the local union representative telling her that there was “nothing she could do until it was time to renew dues next year.” The aggravated teacher also noted that since her conversation with the union representative, she had experienced a discernible increase in marketing emails from the ISTA.

I suggested an approach that many teachers would later use dozens of times over the next three years: inform the district payroll officer to cease allowing the ISTA to withdraw union dues. Fifteen minutes later we sat in her classroom, writing an email directing that the ISTA was to lose access to her paycheck. It was several months before the union had realized she had stopped paying and had left.

With the 5-4 *Janus v. AFSCME* decision a year later, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the free speech and association rights of public school teachers—ruling that teachers could not be compelled to join or remain in a union. Attorneys general in Alaska, Indiana, and Texas followed by issuing guidance that teachers must opt in to have union dues removed from their salaries (instead of needing to opt out).

By the time *Janus* came down, I had helped about 20 teachers leave the union at this point, but I was not prepared for the incoming flood. I later learned that one teacher I'd helped leave the ISTA had informed a group of friends at a professional development that I was aiding teachers, and word had spread.

Following Attorney General Curtis Hill's guidance, I began to receive emails, texts, and direct messages on Twitter and Facebook from Hoosier teachers I'd never met who had heard I was willing to help them leave the ISTA. Between 2018 and 2021, I helped an additional 60 teachers leave the union through declining renewal, talking to district payroll, and in one particularly memorable case, announcing an elementary teacher's departure in the middle of an ISTA meeting.

One article I wrote for the *Washington Examiner* on the rationale behind negotiating your own salary instead of relying on the unions resulted in quite a few messages from K-12 Hoosier teachers asking about the fastest way to abandon the ISTA.

In 2021, Gov. Eric Holcomb signed a law into effect that required school districts to get permission from teachers each year before deducting union dues from their paycheck. This, coupled with a growing reputation I was earning for exposing ISTA-backed politics in classrooms, put my name in front of dozens of Indiana teachers looking to leave what was becoming known as an expensive, annoying, and pointless club.

Now, Indiana teachers only need to let their banks know that no more money should be allowed to go to the “Easy Pay” system set up by the ISTA. It’s easier than ever to leave.

By the end of 2021, scarcely a week would go by that five to 10 messages and/or emails would arrive in my inboxes asking me to share a friendly phone call with a teacher planning to leave the union. I recently crossed the threshold of having assisted 200 in leaving the ISTA (along with a few dozen aided in leaving other teachers unions), and I took some time to reflect on the ramifications of these actions.

I don’t believe that a \$200,000 annual loss means that much to the Indiana State Teachers Association. Two hundred teachers in five years isn’t a death-blow to the 40,000-teacher membership that the ISTA claims to have.

I will point out that in contrast to the ISTA’s boasting, districts across the state are seeing a sharp decline in ISTA membership. Several administrators in both rural and urban districts have told me that they experienced over a 20% drop in union membership since 2016.

The biggest takeaway from my experience in talking to dissatisfied Hoosier teachers is the perception that the ISTA’s offerings are worthless.

The ISTA claims to advocate and to provide better working conditions and increased salaries to its teachers, and many of its local representatives promise that the ISTA will represent teachers in lawsuits and contract negotiations—thus providing safety and security.

Unfortunately, the ISTA is categorically worse at these stated promises than free alternatives that frankly require less effort. Of the 200 teachers I helped leave the ISTA, the vast majority indicated their aggravation at the union’s lack of effort in competent contract negotiation. Regardless of union status, Indiana teachers are constantly asked to sacrifice prep periods and to take over other teachers’ classes without additional compensation—all this without so much as a whimper from the ISTA.

I have received several text messages from Hoosier teachers who, after leaving the union, negotiated better-paying contracts for themselves in Lawrence, New Albany, Crawfordsville, Muncie, Greenwood, and Elkhart, Indiana.

Caleb Wakefield, a teacher in Pike Township in Indianapolis, told The Daily Signal, “The ISTA and [the National Education Association] seem to care more about courting politicians than the members they profess to serve. Most of the critical bargaining is done by local associations, and hardworking educators.”

I’m flattered to say that many teachers I’ve helped leave are happier to be out of the union. Martin Strother, a former teacher at Hamilton Southeastern, told The Daily Signal, “Tony helped a couple of teachers at my school leave the ISTA, and they’ve both been far better for it. No teacher deserves to be taken advantage of by the ISTA.”

While many teachers expressed their worry about discipline-related legal threats when absent from the union, the Attorney General’s Office reminds all public educators annually that in any discipline-related lawsuit, the state of Indiana would represent the teacher for free. There are also better representation options for teachers without the union’s massive price tag and political nonsense. Indiana Professional Educators promises the same legal protections that the ISTA offers at only \$107 a year, without lobbying for Democrat policies.

Finally, the tidal wave of political content the ISTA pushes out has become unpalatable for Indiana teachers. While the ISTA has been fearmongering about education reform from libertarian and conservative policymakers for years, the last six years have been particularly toxic. Endless emails, calls to action, and teetering towers of talking points saturate the inboxes of teachers who would prefer to be left alone.

Several scandals have driven teachers to resign, of course. For example, in April 2022, the ISTA elected a man with a disturbingly racist and horny social media presence to be its vice president (following the outrage, he “voluntarily” stepped down).

Local negligence from the ISTA hurts countless teachers. Bree Boyce, a former Indiana special education teacher, told The Daily Signal, “When I was in the classroom and needed them to step up for me, the ISTA did not take the time to understand what was going on. Rather, they manipulated a young and naïve teacher while making the situation worse.”

One Indianapolis teacher, Mark Majeski, told The Daily Signal:

I left ISTA for primarily three reasons. First, the organization places a higher value on Democratic fundraising than on grassroots issues. Secondly, the local leadership is not interested in fighting administrative malfeasance and their dereliction of fiduciary responsibilities (most recently in the form of large amounts of money spent on [social and emotional learning], restorative practice, and the continued wasteful spend on technology that does not promote academic achievement). Finally, ISTA does not fulfill the mission of a traditional union. Rather, it is just a dues paying/fundraising segment of the radical Left of the Democratic Party.

The biggest conclusion I draw from helping 200 teachers leave the Indiana State Teachers Association is something we all can relate to in the last few years. Most teachers leaving the ISTA are exhausted. They're tired of the endless political preening, progressive pressure, and empty promises that pour out of the mouths of state and national leadership. Most teachers want to be left alone, partnering with students' homes to create the best academic environment possible. Over 200 teachers in Indiana have told me that the ISTA has become an obstacle to that goal.

Have an opinion about this article? To sound off, please email letters@DailySignal.com and we'll consider publishing your edited remarks in our regular "We Hear You" feature. Remember to include the url or headline of the article plus your name and town and/or state.

The Daily Signal depends on the support of readers like you. [Donate now](#)
