

For the Students: The 1968 Florida Teacher Strike

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Introduction

Publically funded education has always been a contentious point for politicians and constituents alike. Questions of funding, teacher evaluations, and concerns about the role government plays in managing public school systems have troubled law makers since public schools came into existence. Many believe that schools are vital for the betterment of society's youth, but this seems to be the only point people can agree upon. When the education system seems fails teachers are often the first to bear the brunt of the blame. However, the problems of education run deeper than just those elements under the control of teachers. Lack of funding, overcrowded schools, out-of-date text books, and poor facilities generally plague many failing school systems.

These problems became the overriding theme in Florida's teacher walkout of 1968. The teachers involved in the walkout called for systemic educational reforms that they believed would allow them to fully educate the students of Florida. The walkout coincided with broad political movements of the time, and became not only a battle over education, but one of conservatism and liberalism. Unfortunately few of the lessons learned, nearly forty five years ago, are remembered today. Many of Governor Kirk's educational reforms from the late 1960's mirror those of Governor Rick Scotts, and the battles that the teachers fought during the sixties are now being re-fought in Florida.

With no state income tax and a warm climate Florida became a hotbed for northern retirees seeking to relocate from their colder homes. With retirees flocking to Florida in record numbers in the years following World War II, politicians looked to gear their campaigns towards

these new constituents and education took a back seat to other issues, such as low tax structures and an emphasis on services for older residents which pandered to the elderly. This led to a severe downturn in public education that affected many schools and counties. The retiree population had little concern for education as their children, already adults, received their education years before they moved to Florida. Campaign pledges by gubernatorial candidates Hayden Burns and Claude Kirk of no new taxes showed what little interest the public had in properly funding the education system. The issue of funding for public schools, always controversial, reached a breaking point during the late sixties, and many school systems began to crumble under the weight of the lack of funding.

Florida's political structure also reinforced a general lack of concern for education and funding. Legislatures led by the "pork chop gang" of the 1950's and early 1960's concerned themselves with issues outside of education and ran the government in a sort of good ole' boy system that promulgated the issues of the failing educational system. The mal-apportioned legislature gave disproportionate power to the rural areas while ignoring the issues of urban areas, especially in south Florida and the Tampa Bay region. Florida historian David Colburn in his book From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans writes that:

Throughout the decade, the Florida Legislature remained among the worst-apportioned in the nation, with only 13.6 percent of the population electing more than half of the state senators and 18 percent choosing more than half the members of the House of Representatives.¹

¹ David Colburn, *"From Yellow Dog Democrats to Red State Republicans,"* (University Press of Florida, 2007), pg 32

With Florida's population boom, urban areas grew exponentially, but during this time the concerns of the urban areas went largely ignored from largely conservative north Florida politicians. Urban areas pushed for educational reform, but often found themselves mired in a conflict with the pork chop influenced legislature. In addition, since Florida law required that school districts in the state remain contiguous with county lines, local leaders could not sub-divide districts to carve out a possible funding problem. Urban areas are generally more progressive than rural areas, and this difference in ideology can be seen throughout the battles over educational funding within Florida.

With the educational system in crisis, the National Educators Association (NEA), the largest teachers union in America, sought to address the problems within Florida. Governor Hayden Burns pandered to the teachers in his election bid in 1964; expressing his concerns over teachers' salaries in Florida, although his campaign promises appeared empty in 1965 when then-Governor Burns and the Florida legislature denied a pay raise for teachers. Frustrated and with little choice, teachers and the Florida Education Association (FEA) asked the NEA to step in and investigate. The NEA report was, at the very least highly critical of the education system in place in Florida. This document showed the frustrations of the educators when quoting a teacher spokesman as saying, "Never before had they known a governor and legislature or be so firmly committed to holding the line on taxes, or a governor to hold so tight a reign over the legislature."² A St. Petersburg Times article written shortly after the report's release stated, "The report said years of rural-dominated Legislatures, improper control of education monies,

² Don Pride, "NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation" *The St. Petersburg Times* March, 11 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAIIBAJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIBAJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

and political meddling in educational matters have depressed the level of education in Florida.”³ As classroom enrollment grew and funding declined, education in Florida had atrophied to a point of no return. No new tax revenues led directly to the lack of funding needed for schools to function, but the legislature and Governor Burns still held on to their ideas that education could be reformed without extra state revenues. The report addressed these issues:

“Although they sharply increased the states budgetary commitments within the limits of existing revenue sources, they successfully resisted any measures that called for new taxes or increases in current tax levies adhering consistently to the governors dictum against any revenue increases for the next biennium.”

Differing opinions of funding schools and reforming of the educational system without raising taxes emphasized the crux of the battle over education especially in Florida during the sixties. Schools often lacked proper funding to provide an adequate education, but in order to raise funding to an appropriate level to accommodate increased enrollment, policymakers had to improve tax increases an unpopular move with the older population. Influenced by the retiree’s political pressure, the legislature and Governor Burns refused to budge on this issue, directly leading to the education crisis.

Burns responded to the report by saying he had already addressed many of the concerns laid out during a conference held between the him and 1,5000 teachers held in Tampa. The legislature did, in fact, previously address the issue of the pork-chop controlled

³ Don Pride, “NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation” *The St. Petersburg Times* March, 11 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAIBAJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIBAJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

legislature by passing a new apportionment plan based on population that gave urban areas control over the legislature that received approval one day before the report's release. Since the report's main criticism dealt with the rural control over the legislature, the new plan gave hope to many educators in Florida. Politicians did express, however, their strong belief that teachers should confine their presence to the classroom, a theme echoed by Claude Kirk during the walkout. Burns also fired back at the report and the implications of his failure as governor to properly support education, exclaiming, "Politics should be left to the pro politicians and indicated he could accomplish a great deal more for education and educators if the latter would concentrate their own profession and stay out of the political arena⁴." Burns' reaction to the critical report reflected his opinion on education that which his successor also took. Both felt that education could be reformed through politics and politicians and not through the ideas of those who made education their life's work.

Beyond political and funding considerations the report also looked at other aspects of Florida's education system. The NEA and FEA believed an agenda of reform was vital to revitalizing education in Florida. This document listed numerous failings of the education system including:

"a growing teacher shortage, quality differences between predominately white and predominately negro schools; inadequate professional salaries; a weakened continuing contract for teachers; too few kindergartens; too many small schools; too few remedial

⁴ Don Pride, "NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation" *The St. Petersburg Times* March, 11 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAIIBAJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIBAJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

classes; too few shop or vocational courses; and too much dependence on out of state teachers to meet Florida's needs."⁵

Interestingly, while people from around the country flocked to Florida, teachers trained in Florida left in droves. The report stated that, "five out of every six teachers in Florida come from other states."⁶ The reason being that Florida could not competitively match other states' teachers' salaries, which forced many Florida graduates teachers to seek work elsewhere. Burns said he supported a minimum teacher starting salary of \$5,000 and that he would address within the legislature, but this minimum salary, lower than even the proposed \$6,000 minimum salary by the Continuing Education Council in 1965, would do little in keeping teachers in the state. While teachers, often underpaid in other states, Florida seemed to be especially miserly in this regard. Many of the teachers involved in the walk out described their wages as barely above the poverty level, and felt fair pay for their work a necessity.

The report also addressed concerns over the practice of electing county school board superintendents. While many progressive counties, such as Alachua County, appointed their superintendent through the school board, other small rural counties held elections for the superintendents. Oftentimes the elected official had little experience with education putting the county at a severe disadvantage in regards to education since political patronage often determined the outcome. Prior to 1949 and the Minimum Foundation act, county

⁵ Don Pride, "NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation". *The St. Petersburg Times* March, 11 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAIIBAJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIBAJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

⁶ Don Pride, "NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation". *The St. Petersburg Times* March, 11 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAIIBAJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIBAJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

superintendents did not even need college degrees. This practice differed greatly from other states and the NEA report stated “Florida is the only state in the union which does not require its superintendents to have professional qualifications for running the schools.”⁷ Florida, in almost every aspect, appeared to rank behind other states in regards to education.

Interestingly the NEA’s report called for more political action from teachers, though this document, “warned that blindly militant action could cost the groups their professional status.”⁸ The NEA’s stance against “militant action” changed drastically a few years after the report, but at the time the report came out the NEA and the FEA felt they could garner change without such drastic measures as a strike. This would all change with the election in 1966 of Claude Kirk and his proposals.

By the time the many teachers in Florida made their fateful decision to walkout on their jobs, classrooms, and students in 1968, Florida’s educational system had reached a breaking point. Lack of funding propagated by a rural-dominated legislature forced many of the school systems to use out-of-date or even decrepit materials. Noncompetitive salaries provided to the teachers of Florida’s forced an already thin workforce to stretch its resources even further, forcing many Florida university trained teachers to look towards other states to ply their trade. While Claude Kirk’s speech to the legislature marked the beginning of a contentious debate in Florida over education, the actions of past governors and legislatures forced Kirk and teachers

⁷ Don Pride, “NEA Report Highly Critical of Situation”. *The St. Petersburg Times* March 11, 1966. Accessed November 24, 2011 <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAAIABJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIAIBJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

⁸ <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=u-xRAAAAIABJ&sjid=DHQDAAAIAIBJ&pg=6064,20112&dq=florida+education+g:locflorida&hl=en>

to look for change in a system broken for many years. The ideas on reform differed greatly on both sides of the political spectrum and while thousands of teachers participated in the walkout others agreed with Kirk, thereby, showing the complexities involved over the debate of educational reform. This debate still rages on, and many parallels can be seen between the issues involved leading up to the walkout and the ones that are being discussed in Tallahassee today.

Chapter 1

On February 19, 1968, more than 27,000 teachers did not show up to work, forcing numerous schools to close because of a lack of instructors. The teachers had finally reached their breaking point. They felt they could no longer adequately serve the students of Florida due to a lack of support from the legislature, Governor Kirk, and Florida taxpayers. The teachers for their part stood resolute in the face of a distrustful public and a reactionary governor. Perhaps buoyed by the rapid increase and direct action of social movements, such as the civil rights struggle of the sixties, the teachers saw 1968 as the time to engage in a radical fight against a system that had little concern for the education of Florida's children. While Governor Kirk's campaign rhetoric looked towards making Florida "first in education," he did little to improve the schools. Kirk wished the impossible: to improve education without actually having to pay for it. Schools by 1967 seemed to be falling apart, out of date textbooks pervaded almost every school, while some districts were forced to cut spending; they did this by cutting the bus systems and placing a cap on kindergarten to save a dollar here and there.

The teachers saw Kirk's promises for what they were, hollow words used to appease the electorate. The teachers demanded reform but got none. They fought for what they believed to be a just cause that would benefit not only themselves but the state as a whole. While newspaper editorials lambasted the teachers and public opinion seemed to favor the state, the teachers did have a core group of supporters in the very people who had firsthand knowledge of the problems of an underfunded school system, the students themselves. Many students took to letter writing campaigns and in some cases school-wide walkouts to show their support

for teachers and the improvement of the school systems. Contrary to what Governor Kirk wanted Floridians to believe the teachers' walkout of 1968 stemmed from a lack of governmental support of a fundamental right supposedly afforded to all Americans, education. The teachers were hardly a greedy self-indulged group shirking their duties to the people of Florida as portrayed by Kirk and many newspapers, but rather educators who sought to improve a failing education system that had little support and funding for years before the walkout, making this struggle not one of for the teachers, but for the students.

By 1967 the year of Claude Kirk's election as Governor of Florida the educational system needed drastic change. Although many of these shortcomings as mentioned in the introduction had existed well before Kirk's election, but in 1967 with Kirk as the first Republican Governor elected in Florida since reconstruction – possessed a management style befitting of a more reactionary leader, one who often refused to compromise and allowed partisan politics to rule his decisions. His promises to curb tax increases resonated with Floridian's, especially retirees, but this promise hindered his other promise of making Florida "first in education". Before Kirk even took office the NEA had threatened sanctions against Florida. On February 9, 1967 the FEA sent out an action alert to all members stating the possible sanctions. Including:

- A. Possible public censure of governmental officials who fail to meet their responsibility to Florida public schools.
- B. The possibility of a nationally circulated notice of conditions in Florida which, in our opinion, causes this state to be an unsatisfactory place to render public school services.
- C. The possibility of notices to business and industry describing our understanding of conditions in the State which resulted in the imposition of sanctions

- D. The possibility that individual members of the profession, presently employed in the schools of Florida, would be unavailable for contracts in this state after this school year (1966-1967) is completed because of conditions presently existing.
- E. The possibility of a nationally circulated notice declaring that individuals that offer or accept employment in Florida public schools, aside from current contractual obligations, could be subject to charges of unethical conduct.⁹

The document also showed the FEA's determination in making these sanctions a statewide issue not just a county one by stating, "If statewide sanctions are imposed, they will be a result of lack of adequate legislative action; therefore, they will apply to all 67 counties regardless of local financial effort."¹⁰ This also displayed the disparity of education in Florida. While many of the wealthier counties in Florida could afford to fund their education with little help from the state, the poorer counties were mired in a crisis of lack of funding and support from the state. The FEA realized that sanctions and eventually the walkout would only work if all the counties in Florida showed their comradeship in support of education across the state, not just their particular counties. Obtaining the wealthier counties support also became extremely important as they often garnered the most attention from the State Legislature and the Governor. The attention given to the wealthier counties proved that Florida's poorer counties remained woefully underfunded and neglected despite the implementation of the Minimum Foundation Program of the 1940's which supposedly would provide a guaranteed baseline of support for all

⁹ FEA Action Alert: Status of Sanctions Alert, February 9, 1967 Series M86-11: FEA Papers, Carton 106, File Folder 1, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

¹⁰ FEA Action Alert: Status of Sanctions Alert, February 9, 1967 Series M86-11: FEA Papers, Carton 106, File Folder 1, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

counties. The solidarity of the teachers became an important theme during the school crisis and eventual walkout.

The tipping point seemed to be Kirk's balanced budget that revealed massive cuts to education spending. According to an FEA report on April 26, 1967 Kirk slashed education funding to the tune of 66.4 million dollars.¹¹ These planned cuts affected junior colleges (which at the time were under the jurisdiction of the public education system of various counties rather than a statewide system), kindergartens, libraries, and exceptional child care.¹² Kirk revealingly showed the teachers of Florida his true intentions. While he campaigned on the idea of improving Florida's education for the better he refused to spend the money necessary to improve a crumbling system. The FEA responded in kind by again threatening Kirk and the state with sanctions. They sent proposals to Kirk and the legislature that they felt would help improve the schools, but none of the proposals even made it to either house of the legislature. The legislature along with Kirk, had their own ideas on how to improve education, and took very little input from the teachers themselves. This lack of communication became a key component in the teacher walkout in the coming year. Teachers felt marginalized by the government, and Kirk's actions did very little to assuage their fears. Kirk's reaction and treatment of the teachers and the union was influenced with his background and stance on unions in general. As a businessman before his election Kirk viewed the education system like a business. He felt administrators should be more like CEO's of companies. In a speech he gave to the legislature Kirk discussed his meeting with prominent businessmen in Wisconsin, Illinois

¹¹ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

¹² How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

and in Pennsylvania and the interest these men took in Florida's and Kirk's plans to change in education. Kirk stated, "These businessmen and financiers know the balance sheet of public education – and they are watching to see how we will meet this challenge to state government."¹³ While these businessmen as Kirk put it, "knew the balance sheet of education," they along with Kirk had little understanding of education itself. The problem becomes an age old question that has plagued Florida's education system for years before Kirk's election: how can people with little or no experience in education beyond attending classes as students make decisions involving education? The practice of electing a school superintendent who often had no experience as an educator, but a wealth of experience in politics and or business, by some counties, instead of the more progressive approach of nomination by the school board, laid out a perfect example of non educators running the education system:

The FEA continued to pressure the Kirk and the legislature for reform, but received little in encouragement. Newspapers began covering the story more closely; the Miami News on May 10 that the FEA would impose sanctions across the state by May 18. They editorialized

"Make no mistake Florida teachers are angry. They started getting exasperated about the state's neglect of education about eight years ago. For the past two years they have been determined to act. They have waited only to give the 1967 governor and legislature an opportunity to begin making up for the neglect, in fact the FEA had some difficulty persuading the members to that patient."¹⁴

¹³ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk JR., To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature, January 29, 1968, Series 960, Claude Kirk Papers, Carton 1, File Folder 10, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL.

¹⁴ Louise Blanchard, "FEA Sanctions Seem Likely by the End of Next Week," *The Miami News*, May 10, 1967, Accessed March 12, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=RVo0AAAAIIBAJ&sjid=OOsFAAAAIBAJ&pg=854,1930985&dq=fea+sanctions&hl=en>

By May 13, 1967, the FEA had reached a breaking point. With little support from the legislature and the Governor, and no relief in sight, the FEA held a statewide meeting to vote on which sanctions to impose. Members of the FEA across the state voted almost unanimously in favor of imposing the sanctions against Florida. On May 24, the FEA, in an attempt to have an open dialogue with Governor Kirk and the legislature, held a legislative information session at Florida State University. Over 2,000 teachers attended to show their support for the FEA and in hopes of ending the sanctions before they ever took place. Perhaps foreshadowing his refusal to negotiate during the walkout Governor Kirk failed to appear. Kirk's refusal to attend the session showed his unwillingness to even discuss the education crisis with the teachers. This break down in communication became a constant theme between the sides during the walkout. While Kirk did not attend the FSU meeting; some legislators did appear, many of them progressive Democrats. Here the Democratic legislature found the perfect opportunity to attack the Governor and place the blame within his office for the education crisis. By not attending, Kirk allowed the Democrats to increase the rhetorical tension between Kirk and the FEA. The divide between Kirk and the FEA, intensified by the Democrats, also outlaid another issue that hindered the education reform sorely needed in Florida: bitter partisan politics. Kirk and the Democrats in the Legislature fought constantly, especially on matters pertaining to education. Both sides saw education as a political tool to be wielded against the opposing party to show their inadequacies. This, too, became a major issue during the walkout as teachers felt both sides used education to reach their political gain.

The NEA, despite Kirk's assertions, had up until this point not imposed organizational sanctions against Florida. This changed when the FEA asked the NEA to impose national

sanctions in an effort to show teacher solidarity on a national level. On May 29 the NEA sent Dr. Dana F. Swick the Superintendent of Schools in Kingsport, Tennessee to investigate the situation in Florida. She found the situation dire for Florida teachers and agreed with the sanctions by the FEA and called for NEA sanctions of their own. On June 5, days after Dr. Swick arrived the NEA released this statement:

The executive committee of the National Educators Association has been notified the NEA commission of Professional Rights and Responsibilities that the climate for public education in Florida has deteriorated since the commission made its study in 1965. In view of the Situation, the following national sanctions are invoked by the NEA Executive Committee: 1. Censure of the Governor of the State of Florida and those legislatures who support his program as it applies to schools 2. Request members of the teaching profession not currently under contract to teach in Florida to refrain from seeking employment there.¹⁵

By calling for sanctions against Kirk and the legislature who supported his policies made, the NEA its intentions clear. The national teachers union blamed Kirk for the crisis (perhaps in retrospect somewhat unfairly, as Kirk inherited an already dysfunctional system, although in the view of the FEA and NEA he did little to fix it), and they planned to make Florida a national issue.

With the sanctions in place it appeared that the education crisis had reached its boiling point. But the worst was still to come. Interestingly, at the beginning of the sanctions, teachers talked very little about the possibility of a strike. While they threatened not to renew their contracts for the next school year they still felt obligated to fulfill their previously signed

¹⁵ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

contracts, as many of them viewed a strike as an extreme or radical measure. The same article from the Miami News also touched on the possibility of the strike. "As a guess Florida teachers aren't quite angry enough to support a strike. They've talked about being professional, and many of them would regard striking as not professional behavior."¹⁶ With the sanctions in place the FEA and the teachers felt confident that the education crisis would move in right direction in the legislature and in the governor's office, but as the school year came to a close, very little happened.

Kirk for his part fought back against what he perceived as radical or militant actions from the FEA and the teachers themselves. In a press conference he gave on June 6, Kirk took the offensive referring to George Dabbs (president of the FEA) as a Quisling.¹⁷ His choice of words (calling Dabbs a traitor to the state) and attack against the president of the FEA showed Kirks true feelings on the teacher's union. He feared that the union held too much sway in Florida and were aiming to garner even more support. At the time of the sanctions Kirk could be heard often referring to Florida as a testing ground for the NEA to implement strikes across the country. In Kirk's view the union especially the NEA wanted to control education within Florida. The NEA did in fact want more control in Florida as they believed the educators themselves had little say in the improvement of the education system. Kirk in particular feared the sanctions would affect the recruitment of new business and industry to Florida. The Governor lashed out against the FEA in a press conference on June 9, calling the FEA the "Anti-

¹⁶ Blanchard, "FEA Sanctions Seem Likely by the End of Next Week,"

¹⁷ Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3

Florida Education Association”¹⁸ He continued, referring to the FEA leadership as “extreme lobbyists who do not represent the average teacher at all,”¹⁹ and struck back at the FEA’s sanction that threatened to notify business and industry to the ills of Florida’s governmental practices exclaiming, “If the lobbyists are bluffing about this anti-business crusade, I am calling their bluff right now; if they are serious about it, it is important that every citizen see them operate out in the open, in the white light of publicity.”²⁰ Kirk essentially dared the FEA to go through with their sanctions even providing them with the name of Howard Piper, the head of an aircraft company seeking to relocate to Florida.²¹ Phil Constants, Associate Executive Secretary of the FEA, replied, “We’d be glad to talk to Mr. Piper”²² Kirk’s response became even more agitated as he continued to refer to FEA as the AFEA (Anti-Florida Educator’s Association) and stating, “let the AFEA use their big war chest for the real battle...against organized crime, if they are really determined to destroy something.”²³

The war of words between Kirk and the FEA leadership had grown increasingly malicious in the months after the sanctions, and would continue to grow in vitriol throughout the crisis. The FEA did begin to see some backlash against their sanctions. For example, a newspaper editorial from the conservative Ocala Star Banner led with the headline, “FEA Puts Picket Line Around Florida” on March 26, just days after the imposed sanctions became public. The article began, “Florida Education Association’s decision to adopt statewide sanctions, in effect, puts a

¹⁸ “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*, June 9, 1967, Accessed March 3, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=NvwLAAAAIABJ&sjid=L1cDAAAAIABJ&pg=5388,1377191&dq=anti-florida+education+association&hl=en>

¹⁹ “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*

²⁰ “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*

²¹ “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*

²² “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*

²³ “Kirk Challenges FEA Role,” *The Evening Independent*

picket line around Florida- a feat for which even Jimmy Hoffa would be proud.”²⁴ The editorial continued, “It seems to us that what the educators are really protesting is they do not want to be held accountable. They don’t want to account for the money they get especially to politicians.”²⁵ Conservative counties and newspapers had for the most part sided with Kirk during the sanctions, and his rhetoric against militant unions gave these newspapers ample fodder to speak against the union.

Kirk also attempted to fight off the sanctions by enlisting the help of the Florida Development Commission in order to recruit new teachers to Florida. With sanctions in place from the FEA and NEA, Kirk’s intentions were clear. He wanted teachers in the state, who would be beholden to him, not the teachers unions. Kirk viewed the unions as the cause of problems within Florida. Teachers who had no affiliation with either the FEA or NEA would not, as he believed, cause such a stir. Kirk simply wanted teachers who would teach regardless of the conditions of the schools system in Florida. His idea of recruiting new teachers to Florida in the midst of a statewide educational crisis was laughable at best. The Miami News wrote satirically

There are teachers not affiliated with either organizations (NEA and AFT American Federation of Teachers) with the combined charm of the Governor, the Development Commission and the climate, it might be possible to find a few such teachers.

Without the added charm of money, it probably would not be possible to find enough. For a conservative politician there is one other possibility. Saves money, too. Governor

²⁴ “FEA Puts Picket Line Around Florida,” *The Ocala Star Banner*, May 26, 1967, Accessed February 3, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=19670526&id=NFJRAAAAIBAJ&sjid=YAUEAAAAIBAJ&pg=2684,6013202>

²⁵ “FEA Puts Picket Line Around Florida,” *The Ocala Star Banner*

Kirk might just take us back to the good old days when any high school graduate was considered qualified to teach.²⁶

Regardless of the satirical tone the article took, it foreshadowed Kirk's implementation of hiring unqualified teachers to replace the teachers who resigned during the walkout in order to keep the schools open. The article also addressed the contention Kirk and legislators took when discussing the FEA and teachers. Kirk often stated that the FEA did not stand for the teachers and he proved his point by saying he had talked with many teachers who did not stand nor believe in the FEA's sanctions. The article stated, "of course some members disapprove of the sanctions. The FEA has 55,000 members. For all of them to agree would be truly shocking."²⁷ While some teachers did not support the FEA's sanctions, the vast majority did indeed stand with their union and fellow teachers in the only way they believed could fix Florida's educational system. The teachers needed some way to have voices heard in order to stymie the crumbling of Florida's education; the union through its membership across the state and the nation facilitated these needs. While the FEA and NEA certainly had their own agendas during the crisis, specifically to maintain their stature as Florida's leading educators union over the AFT, but these bodies also spoke for the majority of the educators in Florida in trying repair a broken system.

By mid-summer of 1967 very little had been accomplished by Kirk or the legislature in addressing the crisis giving the teachers and the FEA cause to continue on with their sanctions.

²⁶ "Kirk Facing Problems as a Teacher Recruiter," *The Miami News*, May 29, 1967, Accessed March 4, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=xzQ0AAAAIIBAJ&sjid=TusFAAAAIBAJ&pg=979,3100377&dq=nea+sanctions&hl=en>

²⁷ "Kirk Facing Problems as a Teacher Recruiter," *The Miami News*

Compounding the situation, Kirk vetoed two appropriation bills that directly impacted educational funding. He line-item vetoed \$164 million of appropriation of which \$150 million of that allotted for education. For his part Kirk not only slashed new funding for education, but also cut funds from a myriad of other state institutions and programs. His line-item vetoes exemplified his conservative agenda, much to the dismay of Democrats and even some Republicans in the legislature. Kirk defended his vetoes saying, "In spite of the stringent nature of this budget, the total figure reflects an overall increase \$295.5 million, or approximately 29 per cent, over spending for the 1965-1967 biennium."²⁸ The increase that Kirk mentioned could not sustain Florida's rapidly growing population and the demands this population increase brought forth to the state. Also funding for education grew very little in the years before Kirk, and he failed to realize the dire situation of the schools. While marginally increasing educational spending, Kirk alienated an already angry teacher workforce. There seemed to be confusion over who actually proposed the budget that Kirk slashed. Many of the House and Senate Democrats believed that the spending Kirk vetoed was his idea. Ralph Turlington, a Democrat and Speaker of the House at the time of vetoes proclaimed, "it was the first time in history a Governor vetoed exactly what he asked for."²⁹ Kirk denied this by saying "whatever else this bill may be it is not mine."³⁰ Kirk also faced problems from within his own party. Turlington addressed this stating, "A number of Republicans in the house would override some of the vetoes it passed the senate."³¹ Eventually the Democrats and some Republican

²⁸ "Kirk Slashes Stated Budget to 1.4 Billion," *The St. Petersburg Times*, Accessed March 12th, 2012
<http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=zHJQAAAAIABAJ&sjid=jVoDAAAAIABAJ&pg=5866,5933261&dq=claud+kirk+line-item+veto&hl=en>

²⁹ "Kirk Slashes Stated Budget to 1.4 Billion," *The St. Petersburg Times*

³⁰ "Kirk Slashes Stated Budget to 1.4 Billion," *The St. Petersburg Times*

³¹ "Kirk Slashes Stated Budget to 1.4 Billion," *The St. Petersburg Times*

legislators failed to override the vetoes, allowing Kirk and his supporters to enact a series of appropriations that alienated people across Florida, especially in regards to education. A St. Petersburg Time's article came out shortly after the vetoes titled, "A Sad Day for Florida". The article paraphrased in an FEA document took the legislature to task for "placing their loyalty to Gov. Claude Kirk above the welfare of the state's school children in upholding the Governor's harmful vetoes of educational funds. Floridians will not long remain content with a public school system guided downhill by Governor Kirk and his senate supporters."³² Kirk's vetoes dismayed an already weary teacher work force, and they responded on July 14 by sending telegrams to the National Republican Committee asking them to not have the 1968 GOP national convention in Miami Beach because, "an educational crisis of monumental proportion exists in Florida."³³ The GOP though did not acquiesce to the teachers' perhaps unrealistic demands, deciding on holding the convention in Miami anyways. This in some ways increased the already distrustful teachers' feelings towards Governor Kirk and conservatives, both Democrat and Republican, who opposed an increase of educational spending. While the education crisis began with a Democratic controlled Governors office and well before Florida saw a Republican in the Governor's mansion, Kirk and the republican legislature through their agenda of denying tax increases and underfunding for public institutions brought forth even greater vitriol especially from the FEA, perhaps because of Kirk's anti-union sentiments and his refusal to accept the FEA as a representative of the teachers. On numerous occasions before Kirk took office teachers called for sanctions from the FEA and NEA to address the education

³² How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

³³ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

system in Florida, but they were often calmed by the FEA who felt that the time for sanctions may not be right. This obviously changed quickly during the beginning of Kirk's administration.

To counter act Kirk's budget vetoes and his play to gain public opinion on his side, the FEA held a survey of all of Florida's counties to determine how many teachers planned to teach in the fall. The investigation found that the Florida would be short 4,000 teachers leading to what the FEA referred to as the, "the worst teacher shortage in the state's history."³⁴ While the FEA and the NEA placed blame on the current administration their sanctions certainly played a large role in this shortage. By asking teachers from across the country and new college graduates not to accept a jobs in Florida, there seemed to be no way Florida could recruit enough teachers to fill the vacancies. With this shortage, teachers would be forced to work with even larger class sizes a major complaint from educators throughout the state.

Kirk, for his part, did attempt to placate the teachers by agreeing to a pay increase on July 14. This increase though did little to assuage the anger from many of Florida's teachers over the continuing situation. The pay increase amounted to an extra 17 cents an hour, leaving the base salary for a teacher with bachelor's degree at a \$5,000 yearly salary.³⁵ This fell woefully short of expectations for many of the teachers who continued to feel marginalized in their field. This salary also fell short of many other states including Florida's less wealthy border states. Kirk's attempt to placate the teachers fell short and the sanctions continued. In response to the trivial pay raise and fearing a backlash of public support over the teachers'

³⁴ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

³⁵ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

anger towards a raise, the FEA sent a memo to all its members asking them to “write a personal letter to the parents of each child you taught explaining the undesirable conditions under which you have taught their child.”³⁶ The memo also included an outline of issues for teachers to discuss with the parents. The outline listed

1. Conditions of work:

- a. Heavy class load
- b. Lack materials
- c. Inadequate and outdated textbooks
- d. Low salary
- e. Lack of planning and lunch time
- f. Overcrowded classroom
- g. Lack of equipment
- h. No voice in policy decisions
- i. Any, and all, other factors that kept you from giving their child a better education

2. Why you support sanctions:

- a. Children constantly short changed
- b. Education a tool of politicians
- c. Promises, Promises, Promises
- d. Have tried every other approach

³⁶ FEA Action Alert, July 18, 1967, Series M86-11, FEA Papers, Carton 106, File Folder 1, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

3. Ways to get sanctions lifted:
 - a. Call a special legislative session on education
 - b. Pass appropriations for adequate financing of education
 - c. Pass new taxes for education³⁷

The outline served and campaign to get teachers to write parents served two purposes. First the FEA realized that they needed public support on their side. If the public viewed the sanctions as little more than a ploy to get teachers a higher pay the public would not support them as wholeheartedly than if they felt the sanctions served the greater cause of improving education. Also the FEA wanted and needed parents to get involved in the improvement of the school systems. If more of the public took up their cause than perhaps the governor and the Legislature would be forced to act. For the time public opinion sided with the teachers, but tensions grew even larger between Kirk and the FEA, and the threat of a statewide teacher walkout loomed over Florida like a dark cloud before a hurricane.

³⁷ FEA Action Alert, July 18, 1967, Series M86-11, FEA Papers, Carton 106, File Folder 1, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

Chapter 2

With the 1967-1968 school year about to begin and movement on the part of governor and the legislature, some counties began seeing more radical protests from the teachers. Pinellas County teachers, fearing an imminent salary cut from the county school board called for a countywide boycott of all teachers led by the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association (PCTA). This became the first of many protests from teachers leading up to the state wide walkout in the upcoming months. The Pinellas County School board in response to the threatened boycott refused to negotiate with the teachers; instead the district took the battle to the courts where Circuit Court Judge Ben Overton signed a temporary injunction barring the teachers from striking. President of the PCTA Fred Cekau responded to the injunctions saying, "It's a sad day for Pinellas County and the state of Florida when teachers are forced to go to work as a result of a court order and not as a result of a mutually satisfactory solution to the problem at the negotiating table."³⁸ The article also quoted Cekau's discussion with the school board and that body's response. An excerpt from the article proclaimed that:

The PCTA head had warned the School Board that forced arbitration through the courts will not solve this problem...we have constitutional protections against involuntary servitude." He was cut off abruptly by School Board chairman William H. Williams who said, "I will not permit That Stokley Carmichael type language here."³⁹

³⁸ Charles Patrick, "Teachers Ordered by Court to Report to Work Today," *The St. Petersburg Times*, August 16, 1967, Accessed on March 4, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=oXIQAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=qFoDAAAAIIBAJ&pg=5461,3427392&dq=pinellas+county+teacher+boycott&hl=en>

³⁹ Charles Patrick, "Teachers Ordered by Court to Report to Work Today," *The St. Petersburg Times*

Williams' response to Cekau's claim of involuntary servitude mirrored the attitude of Claude Kirk and other members of the Florida Government towards the teachers union. By 1968 America had seen a new form of political action, that of radicalism. During a time of increasing protests, race riots, and fears of civil disobedience, politicians on both sides of the aisle hoped to contain the union's demands for fear that things might get out of hand. In response Kirk and others became more reactionary in their policies and in dealing with the teachers unions. While it would be a stretch to say that Williams' response to Cekau's demands for negotiation stemmed from Kirk's broader reactionary policies and ideology, one could ascertain that the radical nature of the sixties influenced both Kirk and Williams' refusal to negotiate with the unions. For their part the teachers of Pinellas County did report to schools after the court injunction, although they did so under protest. While the planned boycott ultimately failed it did serve as a harbinger for the upcoming state wide walkout.

With the summer at a close the FEA called for a statewide meeting of all teachers to be held on August 24 at the Tangerine Bowl in Orlando, Florida. Teachers from across the state flocked to this meeting and estimates of how many actually attended ranged from 19,000 (Ocala Star Banner) to 30,000 (St. Petersburg Times)⁴⁰⁴¹. The FEA hoped that with such large numbers attending the meeting that Kirk would be forced to act. Those in attendance demanded a special session of the legislature to address the continuing education crisis. A message of restraint came from the FEA and Phil Constans to the teachers. After the Pinellas

⁴⁰ "Teachers Meet in Orlando," Ocala Star Banner, August 24, 1967. Accessed March 7, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=I2tPAAAAIABJ&sjid=UQUEAAAAIABJ&pg=3470,6155000&dq=tangerine+bowl+teachers&hl=en>

⁴¹ "Teachers: Try Again, Win...Or Resign," St. Petersburg Times, August 25, 1967, Accessed March 7, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=RopQAAAAIABJ&sjid=pFwDAAAAIABJ&pg=6651,2169850&dq=tangerine+bowl+teachers&hl=en>

County fiasco, the popular sentiment of the teachers was one of action. Many began calling for a mass walkout that would affect the whole state. Amid a raucous crowd Phil Constans gave a speech that had many of the teachers standing with applause in his speech he said:

Lord knows I know how fed up, frustrated, and mad you are; how tired you are of seeing kids you teach cheated because you have too any to give them individual attention; how tired you are of crowded classrooms, limited materials, and old textbook. And I know how angry you are to again and again see the children of the state of Florida used as political pawns; and that you have had enough political promises that don't come true. I know all these things and yet I am asking you to turn the other cheek. It would be so easy for us to harass and disrupt the school system, it seems to me and the leadership that that is so foreign to the commitments we have to the children. I ask of you that we fulfill our commitment to the children in full until such time as we are driven to overt action and then to break clean.⁴²

With that speech Constans served notice to Governor Kirk and the Legislature that the FEA and the teachers of Florida would show restraint, but Kirk had to act, inaction on his part would force the FEA, NEA, and the teachers to take drastic measures (strike) in order to improve Florida's educational system. Constans also asked the teachers in attendance to send in a letter of resignation with a blank date on it to show the state that a walkout would occur if they did not act. The FEA with this meeting placed the onus of responsibility squarely on Kirk and the Legislature's shoulders. Yet again the FEA gave Florida's politicians another chance to address the education crisis, but this would be the last chance. If the government of Florida could not come up with agreeable solutions than the FEA and many teachers had made the decision to act in a manner so radical that it would completely disrupt education in Florida. The FEA did not want this to happen as union support understood that public support would dwindle. If no

⁴² "Teachers: Try Again, Win...Or Resign," *St. Petersburg Times*, August 25, 1967,

action was taken, the FEA had little choice but to go through with the threatened walkout. Kirk, in response, continued his anti-union stance. The FEA set time in the meeting for Kirk to speak, but he responded to this by stating, "I don't attend union meetings"⁴³ and referred to the meeting as a "voodoo gathering."⁴⁴ The invitation to Kirk from the FEA was nothing more than a publicity stunt. The FEA knew full well that Kirk would not attend the meeting, but by inviting him to speak the organizers placed the burden of having to reject the teachers upon him.

Days after the meeting Kirk went on the air to combat the backlash from the teachers and the FEA with a television program called "Education in Florida: Perspective for Tomorrow."⁴⁵ In this program Kirk laid out a plan that called for a privately funded study to figure out how to make Florida first in education. He also appointed a thirty member citizen committee to look at the needs of education and make suggestions on reform for the legislature to follow. This did not please the teachers as they wanted immediate results. For years they heard politicians espouse plans to make Florida first in education over a gradual time, but these plans never came to fruition. Teachers felt they could no longer allow education to take a back seat to other political policies. Phil Constans and State School Superintendent Floyd T. Christian replied to Kirk's plan on air. The main point of their response defended the teachers, stating that the teacher's primary concerns stemmed from school problems (i.e. outdated textbooks, overcrowding, decrepit schools, etc.) and not salary as Kirk

⁴³ "Teachers Meet in Orlando," *Ocala Star Banner*, August 24, 1967

⁴⁴ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

⁴⁵ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

often argued to the public.⁴⁶ Christian, as the State Superintendent of Schools, had stayed fairly quiet during the beginning of the crisis leading up to the walkout. As an ex-educator, former superintendent in Pinellas County, and member of the FEA, Christian often sided with the teachers much, to the anger of Kirk. While his public roles during the months preceding the walkout were minimal he would become a major participant and important figure during the walkout itself.

While Kirk and Constans continued their battle of public opinion another threat of a countywide boycott occurred in Broward County. On the same day Kirk announced the thirty person commission the teachers of Broward County resigned in an attempt to force the Broward County School Board to negotiate in good faith.⁴⁷ Broward County, in response, closed all schools until September 25. While the Pinellas County boycott ended before it could even begin, the Broward County teachers successfully resigned from their positions forcing the School Board to act. Officials first sought an injunction, but through outside pressure from the parents of students in Broward County they began to negotiate with the teachers. The negotiations occurred through the courts and on September 19 both sides reached an agreement that reopened the schools in Broward County. This successful walkout gave fodder to both sides of the conflict. The FEA saw the success of the strike and the response from the parents as a positive confirmation that Florida would support a walkout if necessary while Kirk viewed it as yet more proof that radicalism drove the teachers cause. While the Broward

⁴⁶ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

⁴⁷ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

County walkout registered little on a national scale many in Florida paid attention to results as a the threat of a state wide walkout continued to loom over Florida.

As the school year progressed the FEA continued their push to keep public opinion on the union's side. Organizers came up with the idea of holding a parent meeting in schools on Sunday October 1 called "Crisis Sunday." At these gatherings the teacher could explain the failing system to the parents of their students, and to implore them to write their legislators and governor to take action now to fix the schools. Unfortunately the meeting brought very little attention to the problems as attendance was relatively small across the state. The FEA blamed "a close pennant race in baseball and Sunday football games" As a reason for the lack of attendance. Phil Constans came out with a statement "There were isolated instances in individual schools where the number in attendance was good, but in general attendance was poor. Those attending did seem interested in the problems and in many cases were appalled at the conditions found."⁴⁸

The disappointing attendance from "crisis Sunday" notwithstanding, the FEA leadership still had the upper hand in public support over Kirk. In response the governor began to look for a way out of the pending disaster that would result from a statewide walkout. He originally planned to hold a legislative session after the completion of the thirty member task force's review of education of which he gave no timetable, but with pressures from the FEA and the public Kirk began to backpedal. He was quoted as saying, "Obviously the time will come when we have to meet on the problems of education and the first of the year is only two months

⁴⁸ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

away.”⁴⁹ He quickly retracted this statement, enraging the FEA. With the Governor flip flopping on when he would call a special legislative session the FEA called for another meeting of teachers at the Tangerine Bowl to vote on whether they should go through with their resignations. With the threat of a statewide teacher walkout appearing even more imminent public sentiment began to go against the FEA. The St. Petersburg Times a paper that in the past seemed to support the FEA, referred to the teacher union as “militant”,⁵⁰ a word that Governor Kirk often used when discussing the FEA. While the term may have seemed inconsequential at the time it did show the shift in way people viewed the FEA. No longer just a teacher union or association the FEA became a militant organization almost overnight. Even while the FEA planned to vote on teacher resignations they still hoped that a deal could be worked out with Governor Kirk. Before the meeting could take place leaders from the FEA and Governor Kirk held secret meetings in the hopes to avoid what would be America’s first statewide teacher strike. After a week of these meetings the FEA and Kirk announced the cancellation of the October 22 Tangerine Bowl meeting and placed a stay on all sanctions. This occurred when Kirk agreed to speed up the findings from his committee and hold a special legislative session in January 1968. The FEA released this statement:

The FEA Executive Committee has this morning called off the October 22 meeting in Orlando. In light of our work this week, we are confident we can be an effective force behind the Governor’s Commission on Quality Education to reach an early special session of the Legislature dealing with education.⁵¹

⁴⁹ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

⁵⁰ “FEA Sets Meeting for Tangerine Bowl,” *St. Petersburg Times*, October 11, 1967, Accessed March 15, 2012

⁵¹ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives , RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

Kirk, too, released a statement: “With this enthusiasm and support, I am confident the Commission can accelerate its work materially and drive for a finished report by this January or sooner.” Both sides finally seemed to be communicating and negotiating well with each other and both felt great hope to fix Florida’s education going into the New Year.

Chapter 3

The day everybody seemed to be waiting for occurred on January 29, 1968. On this day Claude Kirk met with the special legislative assembly to address the findings of his educational task force. For the speech Kirk addressed for the first time the major issues at play in the school crisis. Governor Kirk began the speech by stating, "Never before in the long history of Florida has any legislature convened for the sole purpose of examining the state of public education and considering the ways and means by which it might be significantly improved."⁵² The special session appeared to be a landmark in Florida history in regards to education reform, but the speech Kirk gave did little to assuage the educators' fears of broad sweeping changes that would do little to actually benefit the education system. Kirk viewed the problems of education as systemic of poor management and lack of oversight of teachers' abilities. He wanted to run the education system in a manner similar to that of a private business. This came from Kirk's own background as a private businessman before his election as governor. However, management of a system of education differs greatly than private business. The people involved, from the teachers, students, and administrators all have needs more complex than those of a private business. Private business can look at its production and profit as a measurable outcome of success, but education does not have such black-and-white quantitative measures. Even the best teachers struggle with motivating students, especially those who come from poor home conditions that directly correlate to the student's performance. Kirk's point that the school system should be operated as a business underlies

⁵² Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature (Tallahassee FL, January 29, 1968) Florida State Archives, Series:960, Carton:1, File Folder:10

the problems many educators' teachers and administrators alike had with Kirk's proposed reform. Kirk accentuated his point when stating, "...a blueprint for the management of public education should occur on a basis of business efficiency and business economy."⁵³

Accountability for schools and teachers also became a major theme for Kirk during his speech. Kirk understood the need for money going towards schools, but refused to allot anymore until the school system could quantify the money worth results. Here again Kirk showed his propensity for treating education as a business even referring to the students as customers:⁵⁴

Money has always been asked for on the basis it was needed for education. But never was there a management system that could provide the facts about specific performance for money already spent—or that could produce anything but the most generalized projections as to future needs.⁵⁵

Kirk used teachers as an example as a need for more accountability within the education system. Stating, "I must say this, however: There should be some acceptable method devised to pay teachers on the basis of demonstrated ability, professional performance and their functional roles in the system."⁵⁶ The idea of pay for performance, still relevant in today's society, is a complicated matter. Educators have long looked for acceptable methods of judging a teachers performance, but the problem lies in the very essence of public education. Students

⁵³ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature (Tallahassee, FL, January 29, 1968) Found in Florida State Archives, Series:960, Carton:1, File Folder:10

⁵⁴ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature (Tallahassee, FL, January 29, 1968) Found in Florida State Archives, Series:960, Carton:1, File Folder:10

⁵⁵ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature (Tallahassee, FL, January 29, 1968) Found in Florida State Archives, Series:960, Carton:1, File Folder:10

⁵⁶ Address of Governor Claude R. Kirk, Jr. To the Special Session of the Florida Legislature (Tallahassee, FL, January 29, 1968) Found in Florida State Archives, Series:960, Carton:1, File Folder:10

are a diverse group some more educationally inclined than others. How then are schools supposed to base teacher salaries on student performance? While a teacher does directly influence a student's performance other mitigating factors such as home involvement play a large role within a student's chance to succeed. Kirk in 1968 failed to understand this dilemma. Kirk's insistence upon pay for performance became a major point for teachers who decided to walk out in the months preceding his landmark speech.

Governor Kirk did, however, address some of the issues raised by the NEA report of 1965. First and foremost he called for an end to the election of superintendents, and to de-politicize public education. These ideas came perhaps directly from the NEA's report. Kirk understood the necessity of wiping away the decades old system of electing superintendents, and saw this practice as a detriment to education as a whole. "These recommendations remove education from the political arena. There is no longer any justification—if there ever was—for electing a Superintendent of Public Education." His ideas on governance over the school board were largely progressive and implemented many of the recommendations brought forth by the NEA's reports, but his proposed reform to all aspects of education let many of the teachers, administrators, and union officials know that a battle over education was brewing, and his speech had larger implications than those just on educational reform. Kirk looked to diminish the role of the union and even that of the teacher in Florida's educational system.

In a move that surprised the FEA and the people of Florida, Kirk, during the special session asked for a raise of taxes for Florida citizens. Throughout his term of Governor Kirk

adamantly opposed the raising of taxes but as the crisis dragged on he soon realized that he must raise them in order to address the situation. This not only surprised the FEA, but also delighted them, until they found where the revenue generated from the new taxes would go. The governor proposed a tax increase of \$580 million. Unfortunately for the teachers “less than half would actually get to the K-12 programs.”⁵⁷ Governor Kirk proposed to raise taxes in the name of education, but the majority of the money would go elsewhere. Kirk used education as a reason to raise taxes, understanding the public’s sentiment to fix education, but the tax raise did little to address education. In an attempt to rectify the new tax referendum the State Senate proposed a compromise package that the FEA accepted. The House proposed a different bill one that would send the majority of the new tax revenue to programs other than education. Kirk refused to accept either versions without a referendum on new taxes, but also refused to extend the special session. The goodwill and patience held by many of teachers at the beginning of the new year had come to an end. Kirk’s refusal to sign either bills that had been proposed left the teachers feeling they had little choice to but to take drastic measures. At the close of the session on February 16, 1968 the FEA sent in the letters of resignations signed by the teachers at the Tangerine Bowl meeting. The day that the FEA, teachers, Governor Kirk, and the legislature hoped in earnest to avoid finally came to fruition. The teachers had decided the only reaction could be action and the country’s first and only statewide teacher strike had begun.

⁵⁷ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

On February 17, The Governor pleaded with the teachers of Florida not to leave their positions. The letter read as follows:

If you leave your classrooms and leave unfulfilled your commitment to the children of Florida, it is our children whom you have labored so long and hard to develop into useful citizens who will be the losers. The disruption a walkout will cause, when coupled with the loss of faith in the teaching profession, will do irreparable harm to each of you individually and professionally. Put yourself in the place of the parents of Florida students who have given their children over to you. Concern yourselves for an unselfish moment. Is a walkout the means to achieve educational excellence? You know it is not, the people of Florida know it is not. In the best interests of Florida children and you as a teaching teacher, I ask you as an individual fearless, farsighted Floridian with faith to walk into your classroom and teach in Florida. Please don't desert your children.⁵⁸

The teachers did not believe they were walking out on their students. Instead they saw their action as the only means to force the state and especially Kirk to address the education. For a year they tried everything in their power to avoid a walkout. They patiently awaited Kirk's recommendations to the state in hopes that a walkout would not be necessary, but nothing came to fruition. The teachers felt they had little to choice but to walkout for the sake of education in Florida. Kirk's letter also served as reminded to the teachers of his feelings towards their profession. By declaring that he would walk into a classroom and teach if necessary he showed his belief that almost anybody could teach regardless of their background and experience, further attempting to denigrate them professionally.

With the walkout in effect public sentiment began turn against the teachers, especially in many of the newspapers that had once took up the cause for the teachers. A St. Petersburg

⁵⁸ Open Letter to the Teachers of Florida, February 17, 1968, Series 960, Claude Kirk Documents, Carton 1, File Folder 12, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

Times article showcased this rise of negative responses in the press in an article called “Florida Editors View Kirk, FEA, and Florida Legislature.” It took excerpts from editorials across the state that showed the rising anger towards the teachers. Many of the editorials referred to the perceived irresponsibility of the teachers and their actions of striking against their employers, and in effect, abandoning their students.⁵⁹ The students of Florida were the ones most affected by the walkout, but the teachers did not strike against them. They felt that without the walkout the education problems in Florida would continue and only get worse in the upcoming years making their actions not against the students but for them. The students, while being negatively affected by the walkout for what many thought would be only a short time, had seen the adverse effects from the failings of the school caused by the governors and lawmakers for many years for years before the walkout occurred. For their part many of the students defended the teachers through a writing campaign and in some cases student walkouts. Gary Cornwell, a junior at Titusville High School during the teacher walkout, described his experiences in an oral history interview:

We were in class listening to a teacher who had not sided with the FEA telling us not to walkout that we would be destroying our future if we did. Then this little mousey girl who rarely talked stood up and said “that’s bullshit lets go” and we all walked out. We left because we supported the teachers, but it also gave us an excuse to protest. I guess that was just a sign of times, we were protesting everything by that point⁶⁰

⁵⁹ “Florida Editors View Kirk, FEA, and Florida Legislature,” *The St. Petersburg Times*, February 17, 1968 Accessed March 30, 2012, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=Xt0yAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=0lwDAAAAIIBAJ&pg=4869,4120888&dq=teacher+walkout+florida&hl=en>

⁶⁰ Oral History Interview of Gary Cornwell, By Jody Noll, October 29, 2011

The walkout caused another dilemma for Kirk: what to do with the schools. With so few teachers the schools could not possibly operate and function as required. Some teachers refused to participate in the walkout. Many of these teachers were new to the profession and seemed to be caught in the middle of a tense situation. Lenny Cimador, a first year teacher and baseball coach in Pasco County, described his reason for not participating in the walkout in another oral history interview.

I was a first year teacher I didn't know what the hell was going on. All I knew at the time was that I was out of college my baseball playing days were over [he played baseball for the University of Tampa] and I needed that job. I did join the union the next year though. You would have been crazy not to at that point.⁶¹

These teachers who stayed were not nearly enough to run the schools, and the governor and Commissioner of Education Floyd Christian decided against closings the schools and hire any person who they felt could perform the job of a teacher. Letters flooded both Kirk and Christian's office in support of and against the opening of the schools, showing the divisiveness of the issue. Many of the parents supporting the schools remaining open wanted to combat the what they perceived as the militant nature of the FEA and the teachers. In letter to Floyd Christian from Marie Binner, Binner declared her opposition to teachers and feared how their actions would affect the students writing:

...thousands and thousands of children are learning, through the actions of their teachers that it is right to strike if you don't get what you want, don't wait for things to take a normal cause, don't use tolerance, politeness, good taste, good manners etc.

⁶¹ Oral History Interview of Lenny Cimador, By Jody Noll, May 5, 2011

Instead be bold, abuse your Governor in public, have no respect for the law, act like a dictator, get yourself arrested.⁶²

This letter mirrored Kirk's anti-radicalism sentiment throughout the school crisis.

Christian's decision to keep the schools open disappointed many in the education field, believing he had betrayed the teachers. Christian as State Superintendent of Schools had little choice in the matter. He was caught between two opposing sides: Kirk and the teachers. The teachers felt that Christian's loyalties as an ex-educator and FEA member should lie with them, and for the most part Christian did support the teachers, but pressured by Kirk and the public, not to mention his statutory duties, he kept the schools open. His relationship with Kirk before the walkout was tenuous at best and only got worse during the walkout. Christian at one point attempted to secretly negotiate with the FEA. After Kirk found out he responded by releasing a statement that read:

There was an obvious but secret attempt to negotiate with the striking teachers, a position which is clear violation of both legal and moral tradition, a position which is clearly in conflict with their sworn responsibility to uphold the Constitution and the laws of this state.⁶³

Christian, in response to a letter written to him by Emily Yerbury who exclaimed her disappointment with Christian's decision to keep the schools open, showed his feelings towards Kirk by stating, "Yes, Emily, I believe in idealism, and certainly I believe in quality schools for

⁶² Letter to Floyd Christian, February 27, 1968, Series 303, Carton 11, File Folder 6, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

⁶³ Statement by Governor Kirk, February 29, 1968, Series 960, Carton 1, File Folder 12, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

children, and I don't give a damn for what Kirk says or thinks about me."⁶⁴ Christian and Kirk's relationship and ill-will towards each other did not help matters during the walkout, although if not for Christian the walkout would not have ended as soon as it did.

On March 8, 1968, weeks after the initial resignations from the teachers of Florida the State Board of Education led by Floyd Christian, called an emergency meeting. At the meeting the board approved a settlement with the FEA asking for \$10.2 million for education for the remainder of the school year, and other minor concessions for the teachers.⁶⁵ The FEA also demanded that all teachers who resigned be reinstated immediately. While Christian and the Board agreed, to this many county school boards looked to use the walkout as an excuse not to hire back teachers they did not like. By March 13 only twenty-seven out of Florida's sixty-seven counties agreed to reinstate in full all teachers who resigned. The refusal to allow teachers back to work continued the walkout in the affected counties, and in response Christian waived the old law stating that teachers could not receive retro-active leave of absences from the county in a time of emergency such as a teacher walkout. This allowed the counties who felt they had a legal obligation to not bring the teachers back a reason to do so. Even with this change in policy some 7,500 teachers remained without jobs would never get re-hired, but on March 14 with the majority of the teachers back in their classrooms the FEA cancelled all sanctions they held, effectively ending the school crisis and teacher walkout of 1967 and 1968.

⁶⁴ Letter to Floyd Christian, February 26, 1968, Series 303, Carton 11, File Folder 6, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

⁶⁵ How Florida Slept: Background on the developing Florida School Crisis, Series 1186-11: FEA Papers, Carton 40, File Folder 3, Florida State Archives, RA Gray Building, Tallahassee, FL

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the walkout the FEA began another campaign; this time focusing on what the walkout gained for the teachers. Many members of the public and the teachers themselves felt despondent after the walkout. They viewed the negotiations as a loss for the teachers and education as a whole. In response the FEA sent another action report to all members this time focusing on what the walkout accomplished. In it the FEA claimed that while the walkout did not fix education, such action for the moment had stopped the deterioration of the educational system. Those who went on strike challenged Governor Kirk, a politician, who repeatedly refused to raise new taxes even campaigning on that motto to raise Florida's taxes by \$350 million. Most importantly, the walkout made the education problems in Florida an issue that Floridians could no longer ignore. While the walkout had few immediate changes, in the longterm the FEA did gain the right to bargain collectively for the teachers, no small feat, in a state with a history of anti-union and right-to-work laws. Former Governor of Florida Bob Martinez who led the local Hillsborough chapter of the FEA during the walkout summed up the importance of this for the teachers, stating in an interview, "We gained the right to collectively bargain for the teachers, a feat that helped paved the way for all public employees to do so just a few years later."⁶⁶

The legacy of Kirk and the teachers remains an important and debated topic in Florida History. While Kirk's administration saw numerous controversies the walkout became a defining moment in his political career. As Edmund Kalina writes in his biography of Claude Kirk:

...In February 1968, Claude Kirk and Florida found themselves embroiled in one of the largest teachers' strikes in American history. This event produced more bitterness, more recriminations, and more controversy than any other episode in an administration that had more than its share of these qualities. For two decades this affair cast a shadow over Florida education.⁶⁷

While Kallina viewed the walkout as a dark cloud over Florida history he took a much more sympathetic view to Kirk's role in the crisis. While the walkout occurred under Kirk's administration the seeds of the crises arose from previous administrations. While many teachers and people involved with education believed Kirk cared little for education Kallina argues that Kirk in fact cared deeply about the educational system in Florida, his ideas though, differed from many in the educational field, leading to this misperception. Kallina writes:

The new governor genuinely cared about education. Sympathetic to the plight of the black underclass, he was convinced that its salvation rested in education. Kirk possessed a touchingly American faith that education was capable of lifting in individual from the most wretched conditions to a position of dignity and prosperity.⁶⁸

While Kirk may have viewed education as necessary and fundamental his policies did little to support this view. Kirk looked towards massive reform in education through a business model. Something Kallina believed made Kirk a visionary in educational reform.

In many ways the Kirk approach anticipated the future. He advocated emphasis on high technology and accountability for teachers and schools. Unfortunately for the governor and the state, Kirk was too far ahead of his time. What would become commonly accepted as educational wisdom two decades later was dismissed out of hand in 1967 and 1968.

Kallina, though, misses the point when making this argument. While Kirk's views may be *modus operandi* in today's political and education climate it still does not fully comprehend the issues

⁶⁷ Edmund F. Kallina, Jr "Claude Kirk and the Politics of Confrontation," (University Press of Florida, 1993), pg. 83

⁶⁸ Kallina, "Claude Kirk and the Politics of Confrontation," pg. 85

involved in education. Kallina's argument of Kirk, as a visionary ahead of time, then allows for the problems in education, that have continued in Florida for decades after the walkout and Kirk's administration, to have their seeds planted firmly with Kirk. Many of the ideas Kirk's held in regards to education continue today in the Scott administration. So while Kirk may have been a visionary, his vision continues to plague Florida's education. Kallina's sympathetic analysis of Kirk during the walkout though differs from that of other historians. David Colburn and Richard K. Scher in their book Florida's Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century briefly discuss Kirk and his role during the walkout referring to Kirk when writing "The same qualities- charisma, demagoguery, and low public ethics- characterized Florida's first Republican governor since Reconstruction, Claude Kirk" and that he "ignored other problems such as a statewide school crisis."⁶⁹ Claude Kirk remains a divisive figure in Florida history, but his role in the walkout, his stance against union leadership, and failure to quickly address the educational crisis can not be ignored when discussing his legacy in Florida politics.

The school crisis and the eventual walkout brought education in Florida to the forefront of political conversations during 1967 and early 1968. While the walkout had little immediate impact it did force the governor and the legislature to at the very least begin repairing the schools. Many perceived the FEA and the teachers as militant radicals serving only their interests, but this could not be further from the truth. The teachers who participated in the walkout, and even the ones who did not but still supported the FEA, stood up against a reactionary governor who had little respect for teachers and unions as a whole. They did this,

⁶⁹ David R. Colburn and Richard K. Scher "*Florida's Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century*," (University Press of Florida, 1980), pg 80

many in spite of the possibility of destroying their careers, to address the educational problems in Florida in the name of their students. The teachers understood they had little choice when they resigned from their positions. If they did not take this radical action the future students of Florida would suffer immeasurable consequences in their education. Unfortunately many of the issues that occurred during these turbulent times are arising again in Florida. This cannot be allowed to happen as the teachers of 1967-1968 fought too long and too hard to see Florida revert back to its educational policies before the walkout. They believed that through their actions they could make a difference. Their cause, simple, to ensure that the future of Florida, the students, would receive the best possible education; with the support of the Governor and the Legislature their dream may one day come true.

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