

**Testimony of Tina Whitaker**  
**United Teachers of Dade,**  
**American Federation of Teachers, Local 01974-0**

**Before the House Education and Labor Committee**

**“STANDING WITH PUBLIC SERVANTS: PROTECTING THE RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE”**

**June 26, 2019**

Good morning, Chairman Scott and Ranking Member Foxx. I would like to thank Chairwoman Wilson and Ranking Member Walberg for the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee. My name is Tina Whitaker. I am a veteran teacher of 21 years in Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida and a proud union member of the United Teachers of Dade. I teach social studies at Arthur and Polly Mays 6-12 Conservatory of the Arts.

I began my teaching career in May 1995 as a substitute teacher in Scotland Neck, N.C., at Brawley Middle School. Scotland Neck is in Halifax County, N.C., and is currently ranked 90th in per capita income in the state. I was excited not only to be giving back to the community in which I was raised, but also to have the opportunity to work with teachers who had nurtured me as a student.

At the beginning of the next school year, I began teaching North Carolina history and language arts to seventh-graders. Still excited, I decorated my class for my new adventure with the help of those same teachers, who were now my mentors. After the completion of a successful year, unfortunately, I was released from my teaching duties because I was told I had not fulfilled my obligation of getting my certification within my "two years" of employment. A month as a substitute teacher plus one full year does not calculate to working for two years, but I had no one to advocate on my behalf since there was not a union I could belong to in North Carolina. I realized that I would have to navigate these waters alone.

I drove to Raleigh, N.C., and pleaded my case to the North Carolina Department of Education. The department said the school district had access to the same screen to verify employment, and I needed to return there and try talking to them. With hope in my heart, I proceeded to go back to the Human Resources Department at the Halifax County School Board. I told them that I had gone to the N.C. Department of Education and asked for the employee records of my length of employment, but they still did not budge. I even tried calling the superintendent of Halifax County Schools. He said that if I wanted a job, I could go to another school at the other end of the county because that was all they had available. I had no one to advocate on my behalf. I had no union, no

professional organization, that could fight for me. Here I was, a product of the community and the county school system who had beat the odds, but I could not get anyone to listen to my pleas. I wanted the students who lived in my community to see that you can go off to college, get your degree, and come back home to serve the community in which you lived.

I went from sadness and embarrassment to anger. I was angry because I was let go unfairly, and those who could have helped me, didn't. I still had bills that had to be paid, and options for places to work were slim. The school system denied my unemployment benefits. I was able to find an education lawyer that took my case pro bono. I called the Human Resources Department to see if we could come to a resolution, but none was provided. I went back and forth on multiple calls. Eventually I received my unemployment benefits.

In the end, I moved to another school system in North Carolina. I took a job teaching reading. I would be responsible for starting a program and getting it up and running at this school, with the understanding that I would take the reading certification test. After three months of building this program, researching resources available, creating lesson plans, and teaching this class, they hired someone else to be the teacher, and I was told I would be assisting her. This was like another punch to my gut. After doing so much for these students and advocating for their needs, I had no one to advocate for me or my needs. Without a union, I had no one to speak for me.

A month later, I moved to Miami and started the process of gaining employment as a substitute teacher and eventually as an educator with Miami-Dade County Public Schools. From my experiences in North Carolina, I had learned what happens when you don't have someone to advocate for you, therefore I did not hesitate to join the United Teachers of Dade once I became a teacher. This union has helped me reach my full potential. After coming from a place where my dreams were stifled and where I was unable to help my community, I found my voice in Miami because of a union that has helped me become not only a better educator, but a better professional.

UTD has afforded me opportunities that I otherwise would never have had. It provides high-quality professional development to all of their 15,000-plus members, and the skills I have acquired have helped me in both my personal and my professional life. The PD I've taken part in has given me the tools to be chosen as the Teacher of the Year and the Social Studies Teacher of the Year.

There are many other benefits of being a union member, such as traveling to advocate for policy and legislation that benefits public school students. Being a part of the United Teachers of Dade granted me opportunities to participate in joint task forces and committees with representatives of the school district. These task forces and committees work collaboratively on topics such as school calendars, teacher evaluations and school safety, to name a few. The recommendations are then presented and may become part of the negotiations between our union and the district.

Not only are union members participating in task forces and committees, we are also giving back to the communities in which we work and live. Our students are the reason we do what we do every day. We know that unions make our schools stronger, which positively affects the students and communities we serve.

We are not just a union within the walls of our school buildings. We participate in advocacy and activism at our state Capitol in Tallahassee, speak at school board meetings, participate in community informational sessions on the state of education, and engage with members of the community on the importance of advocating for all children. As a union, we collected and donated supplies for those affected by the hurricane, provided school supplies to students in need and aided those community members who were affected by the government shutdown. We are not a union that only looks out for its own members; we are partners with our community and we work to support community activities. You will see us at book fairs, parades and other community events. We even provide supplies for our pre-K teachers who don't get the benefit of classroom supply funds that come from the state. We are there for one another, our students and our community. My union in action!

With all that we do in our community, we have still had to organize to combat legislation that adversely affects the children and workforce in the communities in which we serve. We have mobilized to combat legislation on a school voucher program that takes funds out of the public school system, leaving less money to provide additional services that our students need. Our union has mobilized to inform our community and our members about a decertification bill that passed last year. This bill would have adversely affected our bargaining unit. Yes, bad legislation trickled down into our classrooms. Teacher morale has begun to drop; class sizes are now increasing, along with stress levels and health conditions; and the most tragic, teachers have started to look outside of education to make a living. Our veterans are leaving, and our new teachers are staying only long enough to have part of their loans forgiven or until a better offer comes along. Some even leave the profession without completing their first year because they cannot afford to live where they teach.

When bad legislation is passed, it affects morale and district funding that could provide for smaller classes, mental health services, education services and higher teacher salaries. This bad legislation has caused our union to seek other means of giving education professionals a partial solution to a reasonable living wage. For example, our union and school board resolved to have a referendum placed on our county's ballot. This referendum would put an additional tax on our community. Our community partners rallied behind the teachers and the school board to get this referendum passed. Our community agreed with their teachers, and the referendum passed with an overwhelming 71 percent voting in favor.

You must walk your talk. Your message must be one of bringing togetherness in our communities. Healthy workforces with bargaining capability build strong and active communities, and strong communities build stronger economies.

I am Tina Whitaker, and as a proud public school teacher and a proud union member, I want public school teachers around the country to have the right to collectively bargain. It is my hope that Congress will soon pass this important legislation. Again, thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering your questions.