

February 25, 2004

Union Urges Bush to Replace Education Chief Over Remark

By SAM DILLON and DIANA JEAN SCHEMO

New York Times

day after Education Secretary Rod Paige compared the nation's largest teachers union to a "terrorist organization" because of its criticism of President Bush's centerpiece education law, the union brushed aside his apologies and called for his dismissal.

"Our members are the N.E.A., and on behalf of them, I ask President Bush to express his regret to the nation's educators and demand that Secretary Paige step down," said the union's president, Reg Weaver.

And in the House, Representative Betty McCollum, Democrat of Minnesota, called on Dr. Paige to resign. She characterized his remarks as "neo-McCarthyism at its worst."

The reactions made public an often bitter struggle between the Bush administration and the National Education Association, which has 2.7 million members and frequently supports the Democrats at election time. The administration and the union have been at odds practically since January 2002, when the president signed the law, known as No Child Left Behind. It expands the use of tests to raise student achievement.

The union sees the law as a barely concealed effort to weaken public education and build support for vouchers.

In July, Mr. Weaver told delegates at the N.E.A.'s annual meeting that the union intended to sue the Education Department for failing to finance the law fully. Dr. Paige responded that supporters of the law were assembled in a "coalition of the winning" but that "the N.E.A. wants to assemble a coalition of the whining."

That was one of many rhetorical attacks that Dr. Paige has directed not only at the union but also at the law's critics, like school superintendents and state legislators. In recent months he has called such critics "nihilists" and compared them to French diplomats at the United Nations who opposed resolutions on Iraq as well as to racists who opposed desegregation.

In a White House meeting with governors on Monday, Dr. Paige "said he considered the N.E.A. to be a terrorist organization," his spokeswoman, Susan Aspey, said. He quickly apologized, but those remarks as well as mounting irritation with the law among many educators appeared to have created alliances between groups that are often at odds.

The American Federation of Teachers, a union that has 1.3 million members and is a rival, closed ranks with the N.E.A. yesterday.

"Secretary Paige's statement is indicative of the way this administration and this secretary paint with a broad brush and attack anybody that disagrees with them," said Alex Wohl, a federation spokesman. "There has to be room for disagreement, but this administration tends to simply attack the messenger instead of discussing the message."

Dr. Paige met yesterday with Democratic lawmakers, who spent 15 minutes criticizing his remarks. The secretary apologized profusely, people at the meeting said.

"If I had a rewind button, I'd use it," one participant quoted Dr. Paige as telling them.

Dr. Paige said his comment was "insensitive, thoughtless and unfortunate," another participant said.

In a statement issued through a spokesman today, Dr. Paige noted that black and Hispanic students were doing poorly in many schools. "That is the status quo," he said. "That is why I am so passionate about making these historic reforms and drawing attention to the issue."

On a day when criticism rained from many sides, Dr. Paige received support from the union leader who perhaps knows him best: Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers. They worked together when Dr. Paige was the superintendent of Houston schools in the 1990's. Ms. Fallon said his remarks had been misinterpreted.

"Rod has a real sarcastic sense of humor," she said. "I'd walk into the room, and he'd say, 'Well here's my favorite labor terrorist.' But he was joking. He said far worse to me at other times. So I think he popped off with a sarcastic remark that has been blown out of proportion."

As secretary, Dr. Paige has frequently directed what his critics call intemperate rhetoric at those who oppose even parts of the law, which requires that state and local testing systems be adjusted to meet federal regulations. In October 2002, Dr. Paige called state education officials who were setting standards that he considered insufficiently demanding "enemies of equal justice and equal opportunity."

In early January, in discussing the Brown v. Board of Education desegregation case, Dr. Paige compared critics of the new education law to "those who fought Brown," suggesting the critics were racists.

And on Jan. 28, he compared those who oppose educational choice, the movement that includes everything from vouchers to charter schools, to "the French at the United Nations, promising to veto any resolution on Iraq, regardless of what it says."

