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Expected vote on teacher union merger is drawing mixed reviews

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A vote today on the possible merger of the nation's largest teachers unions is drawing mixed views from local education officials.

The "Principles of Unity for a United Organization," is the blueprint to unite the American Federation of Teachers with the National Education Association (NEA). Thousands continue to gather this week in New Orleans, where the vote is taking place, during the AFT's convention.

The United Federation of Teachers, which has more than 100,000 members is an affiliate of the AFT. Neill Rosenfeld, a spokesman for the UFT of New York City, believes the merge "will not happen any time soon," but the union fully supports it.

Some members of the NEA have several objections to the merger, Rosenfeld said, ranging from the determination of which side of the union will actually be in power, and organized labor. The United Organization will be a national affiliate of the AFL-CIO.

About a year ago, both, the AFT and NEA set up a joint policy committee to brainstorm on certain issues.

"I anticipate that that will continue, regardless if there is a former merger or not," Rosenfeld said.

Nicholas Coletto, superintendent of Brooklyn and Staten Island High Schools, could not be reached for comment.

Meanwhile, District 31 Superintendent Christy Cugini does not wish to "interfere" with union business. However, "It would be interesting to find out what the impact of the merge would be on the national level," he said.

Cugini is unsure of what would happen on a local level (if a merge takes place), he said, but hopes for the best when it involves, "the education of our children."

In January, the NEA and AFT negotiators reached conceptual agreement on key organization questions and circulated a progress report within NEA and AFT ranks. Last spring, the NEA board voted 106 to 53 to recommend that its Assembly approve guidelines for united the two unions.

According to Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island member of the Board of Education, "Regardless of the outcome — between the AFT and NEA — clearly accountability, higher standards, continuing education, and year-round schooling, will remain the top priorities and important issues in order to bring the educational system in-line with the rigors of knowledge in the 21st century."

In more news, the AFT's Human, Civil, and Women's Rights conference was also in New Orleans from July 14 to 16, where Sandra Feldman delivered her first keynote address as AFT's 15th president.

The answer to problems at public schools is not vouchers, Ms. Feldman said, but to address the problems that overburden so many of them such as large class sizes, dilapidated buildings, high teacher turnover, and shortages of books and supplies.

From 1986 to 1997, Ms. Feldman was president of the 130,000-member United Federation of Teachers in New York City, the largest union local in the United States.