



# CONSERVATIVE AND LEADING OUR UNION

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOUG CHILDRESS  
BY NANCY WELCH

*Below are excerpts from a conversation between Nancy Welch, Special Education teacher in the Clovis Adult Transition Program and ACE Organizing Committee member, and Doug Childress, Fifth Grade teacher at Riverdale Elementary school and President of the Riverdale Teachers Association. Doug is both politically conservative and a local union president. That combination is more common than many realize. That's because our local unions reflect our local membership. Like Doug, ACE is bringing people together from different grade levels, professional backgrounds, and political perspectives. We know that working together across differences helps us build enough power to make the improvements we want to see for our students.*

**Nancy Welch: Is your entire district union?**

*Doug Childress: Our entire district is union. We cover the entire certificated staff of Riverdale. We are small, but what a union does is proportional to the size of the district. The basic structure and function of a union is the same. We have a separate classified union as well. I have been teaching for 31 years, and I'm very conservative and openly tell people I'm probably the most anti-union union president you'll ever meet. But the benefits far outweigh the negatives.*



Doug Childress  
Union President, Riverdale Teachers Association

**Nancy: Have you been part of a teachers' strike?**

*Doug: I have never been part of a strike. It is the last thing you ever want to do as a union. It can affect your reputation as a union and a district. It would be in the union and district's best interest to work together and make sure that doesn't happen. In order to strike, a very large majority of union members must vote in favor. You go to LA or Oakland, it is very contentious. But you don't have to be that way.*

**Nancy: Is there positive cooperation between your union and administration?**

*Doug: Yes. A good union will work collaboratively with district administration and school board, it's not you working against each other, it's working together. It's everyone working towards the same goal - kids, why we started doing this job in the first place. You want to be constructive, you want to be something that facilitates change in a good way.*

**Nancy: What about union dues?**

*Doug: Our dues are \$108 per month, 11 months out of the year. There is a formula for union dues, depending on various factors. Fresno Unified is \$128 for 10 months. Riverdale pays 11 months to create a savings fund for additional needs.*



Nancy Welch  
Clovis Unified Adult Transition Program  
ACE Organizing Committee

**Nancy: What does it look like when your union negotiates salary/benefits?**

Doug: *We negotiate things based on what the majority wants. Regarding benefits, our district offers multiple plan options. We have at least 6 different health plans: 3 different Anthem plans, 2-3 different Kaiser plans, all with different deductibles/coverage amounts. The union can help negotiate better benefits for staff. This can also help classified staff because health insurance is a bigger percentage of their pay than ours. Currently, our union is in the process of switching to a different benefit plan because it has better coverage but also saves the district money. The money the district saves will go directly into the district's general fund. Sometimes the union can help save the district money and in turn, it trickles down to help employees and students. Regarding salary, it's also based on what the majority would like. Some years we negotiate better benefits, some years we negotiate higher salary. We decide on what we would like to negotiate based off of input on our members' priorities.*

**Nancy: Can the district increase fees to your benefits without the union's approval?**

Doug: *They cannot. Once it's in the bargaining agreement, it can't be changed until the next bargaining round, and they must work with the union and its members to see what the majority would like.*

**Nancy: Does having a union make it harder to fire a teacher who is not doing their job?**

Doug: *It doesn't necessarily make it harder. It does make sure that the district administration follow due process under the Ed Code, and the proper steps under it. Overall, removing a bad teacher will not be prevented. It is much easier for a district without a union to get rid of a teacher for something pretty minor.*

**Nancy: How much do CTA protocols and agendas influence or direct your local union?**

Doug: *It doesn't affect us in any way. It will continue to not affect our day-to-day operations. Some people don't agree with the political things the CTA is involved in. But, education is political. Personally, I don't agree with all the politics of CTA, as I'm very conservative. But a union is a very necessary thing. You can opt out of having your union dues go to anything political. I've been intimately involved in the financial process enough to know that when CTA says you've opted out, your money really will not go to politics. Instead that money can go back to your chapter - professional development, etc. But to be honest, the politics part of CTA is actually very small. You hear about it the most, but it's actually pretty small. CTA has really good site rep training, financial training, and they've been really helpful.*



***Personally, I don't agree with all the politics of CTA, as I'm very conservative. But a union is a very necessary thing.***

**Nancy: Have you been a part of a school district without a teachers' union?**

Doug: *I have not, but my mother was. I don't know why she stayed in a non-union district her whole career because she could have moved to a different district very close by and made \$10,000 more a year and also not been required to do some of the additional duties. Without representation, she didn't have a say in salaries, benefits, etc. and she just kind of was told "This is what you're going to get and everyone accepts it." That might work for some, but it doesn't work for everyone.*





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**Nancy: How much does your district contribute to health benefit costs per year?**

Doug: *Riverdale Unified contributes \$16,000 to employee health benefit costs.*

\*Note: Clovis Unified contributes \$14,400.

**Nancy: If you were a Clovis educator, would you want to join a union?**

Doug: *With the political atmosphere of our career, I can't imagine not being in a union. If I was an educator any place I would want a union. This is coming from a very conservative person. The union can be a positive force. It's not really anything to be scared of.*

**Nancy: What's your general opinion on the success of your union? Pros, cons?**

Doug: *School districts aren't evil, and the more power you have to keep them honest, the more honest the district will be. As our union president, I was in on every meeting they had, every decision they made during the pandemic, etc. We worked hand in hand with the district during the school closure to make sure students had the technology and internet connection to learn from home. The only disagreement we had between the district and the union recently was regarding coming back with in-person students. We came back in mid-February, 84% of teachers wanted to wait for their vaccine, and we weren't able to make that happen (the waiting), but the district got on the ball and made sure teachers got their vaccine - they had people giving vaccines come to their campus. They made sure we had our cleaning supplies, hand sanitizer etc. very quickly and we had that all in place.*

*If you are a union member you have \$1,000,000 of liability coverage (in the event that you need it for a legal situation related to your job - liability, work injury, etc.). As a union member you also have free legal service for anything work related that arises from your job. The CTA office in Fresno is great, and they're really helpful. As the president of our union, I am in contact with our CTA person. We have a CTA service center in Fresno. For example, if a teacher has a legal issue, I call them to get advice in legal matters, next steps, etc. Our CTA service person immediately contacts the attorney on the teacher's behalf. Union dues fund these legal services.*

*A lot of people don't realize that as a union member you have access to those legal services but also you have access to really inexpensive insurance policies - life insurance, disability insurance - there are various other specialty ones, etc. As a 60 year old, I have \$200,000 in life insurance for \$17/mo through the CTA. People looking to start a family can use disability insurance through CTA to take a longer paid leave after having a baby. I always tell people, paying union dues is the "cheapest insurance premium you're going to get for free legal services."*

