

PROPAGANDA WATCH

The Center for Honesty in Education has received reports of several school districts in New Jersey offering professional development sessions provided by The Cato Institute, an openly anti-union Libertarian think tank based in Washington, DC. Cato's Sphere program purports to deliver lessons on teaching civic culture in the classroom in a way that is inclusive of all viewpoints. The reality behind this program, however, is the promotion of a free-market school choice ideology, where parents would be able to pressure districts that choose to teach students the truth by threatening to leave and take the district's public funding with them. While political organizations are certainly free to believe and promote their viewpoints, public school employees should not be forced to listen to propaganda in place of high-quality professional development, nor should the taxpayers of these towns be forced to foot the bill.

The Facts

- Clearview Regional School District has notified school employees that they are required to attend a mandatory PD session presented by Sphere, a Cato Institute program used to inject their partisan viewpoint into the public education discourse.
- Gateway Regional School District is also participating in this program, serving as a host site for educators across the county to attend. Gateway is not mandating this training as Clearview is.
- As the districts have not provided an agenda or any details on the program being offered, we are currently unable to determine if this workshop aligns with state standards for professional development. A review of sessions that have been offered in the past demonstrates a clear conservative bias, featuring sessions with titles including "Is Free Speech Being Chilled in the Classroom", "The Second Amendment Today", and "Religious Freedom".
- Many of the speakers featured in these sessions are employees of Cato Institute or their sister organizations, including The Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.
- Cato Institute does not even claim to be non-partisan. Their website proudly touts that "Cato has successfully injected the libertarian perspective into mainstream policy debates in Washington, DC, and across the country." Their Student Programs Department states as their mission: "to identify and develop the future leaders, thinkers, advocates, and supporters of the libertarian movement, thereby promoting the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace."
- Cato and their allies were founded and funded by Charles and David Koch, and has also received funding from the Bradley Foundation, an enormous funder of right-wing political organizations.

Our Recommendations

- Whether labor law would consider this an impermissible "captive audience" speech, or whether the endorsement by the school of these programs is impermissible, is dependent upon the content of the meeting and the employers conduct and statements during that meeting.
- If you are required to attend a PD session by Cato Institute or any other organization that you believe to be anti-union or political in nature, please take notes during the meeting and reach out to your UniServ field representative for further guidance if you feel your employer has overstepped their bounds. Don't be afraid to speak up. You have the right to respectfully question speakers who are spreading potentially harmful information and challenge their statements with your colleagues.
- If you find yourself in a similar situation to these districts, please use the Center's reporting tool at www.njea.org/edhonesty and let us know. Understanding the scope of this situation will help us provide guidance for your sisters and brothers in other districts and help inform our statewide strategy.