

ATF Committee on Political Education (COPE)

It Works for You.

The ATF COPE is a standing committee established by the ATF Constitution. It exists to carry out the political work of the union. The functions of COPE are to:

1. be the non-partisan political wing of the union;
2. educate the membership concerning political issues;
3. advance the interest of educators on every political front through political action and lobbying;
4. conduct candidate screenings and support the campaigns of selected candidates at all political levels;
5. work with other AFT NM and AFL-CIO COPE Committees to further common goals;
6. report to and receive guidance from the ATF Executive Council.

(From the ATF Constitution)

COPE Q's and A's

Q: Why is COPE essential?

A: As public school educators, our president, members of congress, governor, state legislators and school board members—all ELECTED officials—determine nearly every aspect of our professional lives. Your Federal office holders set national policy, such as No Child Left Behind. Your state senators and representatives decide critical issues, such as per pupil funding, length of school day/year, class size and salary increases. School board members set policy for the operation of the district. Educators must be involved in selecting these decision-makers. An active COPE ensures that your voice will be heard. Recently, public education is under increased political attack. Your involvement is essential to its survival.

Q: Who can be a COPE member?

A: COPE membership is open to any ATF member who chooses to contribute any amount to COPE each pay period. This contribution is strictly voluntary. **At no time does ATF use its membership dues for its political contributions.** The cost of a can of soda every week will help fuel our efforts to elect true friends of public education. Union members who contribute to COPE can become involved in the committee's work. Voter registration, candidate interviews, volunteer recruitment and "Get Out the Vote" efforts are some of the activities that call for your participation and support..

Q: Why is your voluntary contribution so important?

A: Combined with other COPE members' donations, your contributions allow the Federation to become an influential factor in New Mexico politics. COPE conducts political education

training and pays for informational mailings to members about current issues and legislators' voting records. Also, COPE contributes to the campaigns of carefully screened candidates who support public education. The reality of politics is that it takes money to get candidates elected. Without campaign money to give to its endorsed candidates, an organization is powerless. Until the time when the campaign finance laws are changed, ATF COPE will continue to use its resources—your voluntary contributions—to ensure your voice is heard and candidates are elected who support public education and labor interests.

Q: COPE seems to endorse only candidates from one party? Why?

A: COPE bases its recommendations for endorsement on the issues that are important to public school educators. These include: collective bargaining, professional compensation, vouchers, privatization, merit pay and educator retirement. Currently, positions on these issues seem to divide along party lines. We are constantly looking for common ground. Irrespective of political party, ATF cannot support candidates who take stands on these issues that are contrary to union positions and are against the interests of public school educators.

Q: How are candidates selected for endorsement?

A: The COPE Screening and Endorsement Committee looks at several criteria in determining which candidates to recommend for endorsement. For incumbent legislators, COPE has developed a rubric that evaluates voting records and characteristics such as communication, access, responsiveness and advocacy. A candidate who has consistently worked closely with the union and voted for bills the Federation promotes is likely to get our continued support. Conversely, legislators who have voted for bills contrary to our positions (e.g. privatization of public schools) will not receive our support. In these cases, COPE is likely to recommend endorsement of their opponents. COPE sends questionnaires to candidates asking them to state their positions on the important issues and on funding for public education. After the questionnaires are returned, COPE schedules interviews with the candidates. *(Those who do not return questionnaires are not considered for endorsement.)* Based on this information, the committee decides which candidates to submit to the ATF Fed Rep Council for a vote on their endorsement.

Q: I don't want anyone telling me how to vote. Why should I listen to COPE?

A: In its endorsement process, ATF-COPE is not requiring educators to vote in certain ways. The committee collects information on issues important to educators. Similarly, COPE gathers background on candidates' positions from voting records, questionnaires and interviews. The committee then recommends candidates who are likely to support your needs and concerns. **Without question, your vote is your own.** COPE simply works to provide you with the means to make your choice an informed one.

"Teaching is a political job."

- Rod Kirchmeyer, Teacher / ATF-COPE Member

