

# Challenging unions

## FORMER CLINTON AIDE WEIGHS IN ON NEGOTIATIONS

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GRAND RAPIDS — Grand Rapids is “the most important front in the war to improve education in the country” because an outside group is assisting district leaders as they battle the teachers union, political pundit Dick Morris said.

Morris, an adviser to former President Bill Clinton, now works as a Republican-leaning consultant and commentator.

Morris was speaking in three Michigan cities Thursday on behalf of the Education Action Group, a Muskegon-based organization critical of teachers’ unions.

The group has sided with Grand Rapids Public Schools in its labor battle with teachers, and Morris recently narrated a documentary about the acrimonious negotiations.

“This is the only place in the country where a grassroots group is challenging the teachers union,” Morris told Thursday’s gathering of about 125 local Republicans at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. “And the union stands in the way and really presents the ultimate evil — denying us the opportunity to help our children.”

Morris said there are examples of statewide groups that target unions, but they usually don’t last or are tied to a particular issue.

The Education Action Group has sent fliers and paid for billboards in addition to landing Morris in July to narrate an eight-minute video, “Profiles in Courage: The Grand Rapids School Board,” to call attention to the lingering contract dispute.

Morris said unions go too far to protect incompetent members and stifle reforms.

He said groups that have successfully challenged the unions have targeted those other areas, saying privatizing the services saves money and weakens the unions. Grand Rapids in 2005 outsourced its busing and some custodial posts.

“Just like Winston Churchill said, ‘You can’t fight a land war in Asia,’ you can’t get into a fight with a teachers’ union over education. They’re in education, you’re not,” he said. “But you can go after the other areas. People don’t care about who is going to drive the bus, sweep the floor and administer health insurance.”

Paul Helder, president of the Grand Rapids teachers’ union, was dismissive of Morris and the Education Action Group, which he believes consists only of Kyle Olson.

“It’s interesting that Mr. Morris believes that Kyle Olson, the ‘Edu-



PRESS PHOTO/PAUL L. NEWBY II

**Talking education:** “Grand Rapids is “the most important front in the war to improve education in the country,” political consultant, Dick Morris told a group at the Amway Grand Hotel on Thursday.

“Education Action Guy,” is considered a grassroots group,” he said after Morris’ talk. “I’m also startled to hear that Mr. Morris thinks educators are the roadblock to improving education.”

District spokesman John Helmholtz said he didn’t want to comment on the Education Action Group’s role, but said in Grand Rap-

ids the union and district have worked together.

“Grand Rapids can be a national leader, but that’s because of reforms we’ve created in collaboration with all of our employees, and that includes the teachers,” he said after the speech.

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