



Iceberg Ahead: Unions May Play Right-to-Work Off on Teachers

By Michael Van Beek

Summary

The newly passed right-to-work law will undoubtedly have an impact on schools, but the path forward is unclear. Either teachers will feel better represented by their union, or unions will sell out teachers in order to ensure long-term contracts before the right-to-work bill goes into effect in the spring.

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Michigan made national headlines when it became the 24th right-to-work state: Employers will no longer be able to fire employees who do not join or financially support unions, and this will certainly impact heavily unionized public school districts and their employees. But, depending on how districts respond in the short term, it could be either beneficial for both or neither.

This new law won't affect districts for several months or maybe even a few years, since it only applies to new contracts signed after March. Unions, however, will likely try to deny or at least delay this new freedom for employees by getting districts to renegotiate and agree to new long-term contracts before then — forcing school employees, at the risk of losing their jobs, to pay fees to unions.

In order to entice districts to help them protect this revenue stream, unions might offer up concessions like reduced wages or trimmed health benefits — and perhaps quite large ones too — that would save districts money. No doubt these offers will look appealing to districts that have struggled to keep labor costs in line for years.

On the heels of the Great Recession and the discontinuation of federal “stimulus” programs, the prospects of school funding have been rockier than ever before in recent Michigan history. Locking in long-term labor costs is hardly the way to stay financially flexible enough to meet the diverse and changing needs of students.

The stakes of this gamble are high: If school boards agree to a long-term deal, there would be no going back.

Unions using this tactic will be letting the interest of union bosses trump that of teachers and other union members. Even without a union security clause, many school employees will choose to continue supporting their union financially. But other workers might value making the union earn their support, especially if they feel their best interests are not well represented.

These tactics will harm union members in other ways as well. If unions agree to concessions in exchange for prolonging their union security privileges, teachers and other school employees could see their wages reduced. Many districts are still in need of rightsizing their labor costs, so some concessions may still be needed. For some school employees, however, these concessions

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School districts and teachers should take a long look at any proposals by MEA affiliates to renegotiate longer-term contracts.

might be unnecessary, and will come at the expense of union privileges that do little to benefit individual teachers or other school employees.

Further, a long-term union contract might also prevent teachers or other school employees from benefiting if the state increases funding for schools. School revenues are projected to be higher this year than last. Not only would employees be subject to unnecessary concessions, they might also be limited by artificial ceilings on future earnings.

This point helps illustrate why some employees may choose not to pay dues to their union. The union contract that employees are forced to work under is an all-or-nothing proposition, and unions hurt as many employees they think they help with seniority protections, pricey health insurance and rigid salary schedules. Young employees have traditionally been harmed by these policies, but so are teachers in high-demand fields like science, technology, engineering and math. Their potential earnings are limited by the union's desire to pay all teachers the same no matter their field or proficiency.

Right-to-work could do much good for public schools, although it might go unnoticed by parents and students. It's primarily about the relationship between unions and their members, and teachers and school employees stand to gain the most by opting out of paying dues to an organization that doesn't represent their best interests. In turn, unions will have to focus on serving their members better. Both of these scenarios will indirectly benefit school districts — if they let them.

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Michael Van Beek is director of education policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

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140 West Main Street
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