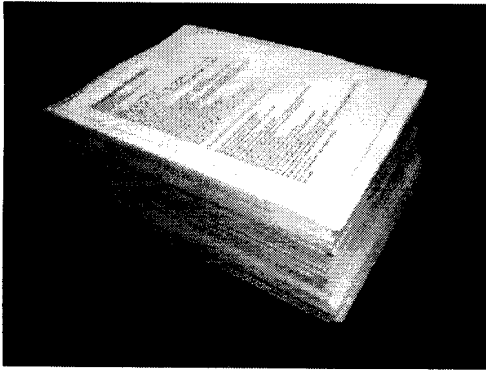


EAG

Education Action Group

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EAG secures union e-mails in FOIA battle

Documents clearly identify strike, bargaining strategy

The Muskegon-based Education Action Group scored a victory in defense of the state's Freedom of Information Act last week when it finally secured copies of e-mails sent and received by the president of the Wayne-Westland teachers union, using a taxpayer-funded e-mail account.

EAG staff also gained some interesting insight in the operations of the Wayne-Westland Education Association as it plotted its bargaining and strike strategy against the school district, all while using the school's own e-mail account.

The victory did not come easy. The powerful Michigan Education Association, parent organization of the Wayne-Westland teachers union, went to court to try to keep the e-mails from the eyes of the public, even though the school administration acknowledged that they should be available to the public through freedom of information requests.

EAG lost the first round in court, when a judge ordered a temporary injunction against the release of the e-mails until a formal hearing could be held. The MEA likely guessed that EAG, a small nonprofit with a tight budget, could not afford expensive legal representation for the hearing.

But EAG Vice President Kyle Olson deftly submitted a second FOIA request, addressing the objections the union attorneys stated in court, and the district, over union objections, promptly released approximately 800 pages of documents.

Most of the documents, minus duplications and insignificant material, have been posted on the EAG website (www.educationactiongroup.org) for the residents of the Wayne-Westland district, and other interested parties, to read. In the meantime, EAG is sharing a few of the highlights of the documents that residents might find interesting or eye-opening.

What's the union's real goal?

Throughout contract negotiations with the school board, and during its illegal four-

day strike last October, the teachers union has maintained that it's battling over several fundamental issues, including staff health insurance coverage and class sizes.

The e-mails strongly suggest that maintaining coverage health coverage through MESSA, an expensive insurance carrier owned and operated by the MEA itself, is far-and-away the union's highest priority, just like it is in many other districts throughout the state currently dealing with labor unrest.

The e-mails also suggest that class size may be little more than a talking point, or wedge issue, to gain the sympathy of parents and get the school board to budge on health insurance.

Throughout the e-mails to and from union President Nancy Strachan, the continuation of MESSA insurance coverage is a frequent theme. That should be of particular interest to taxpayers, because cash-strapped school boards throughout Michigan, including the Wayne-Westland board, have been looking for ways to dump MESSA and replace it with less expensive insurance coverage.

Some districts that have managed to part with MESSA, over union objections, have reported six- or seven-figure savings. But the MEA continues to fight this trend in district after district, because MESSA transfers millions of dollars in excess earnings every year to the MEA.

One e-mail, urging Wayne-Westland teachers to contribute to the MEA's political action committee, says potential donors should consider everything the union does for them, specifically noting salary, medical coverage, worker's compensation, length of the school year, and fighting privatization efforts.

There was no mention of battling for smaller class sizes or improved student achievement.

The importance of MESSA in negotiations was also highlighted in a Sept. 17 update from union leader Jim Coulliard, who wrote "We did not strike because at 10 p.m. on the Saturday on Labor Day weekend they gave us a proposal that included no cap on how much they would pay in insurance increases." Obviously they saw reason for hope that the district might cave on MESSA and overall insurance costs.

In another e-mail, Strachan writes pointedly, "Our goal is to drop all the HMO's and have only MESSA Choices." Sound like a direct talking point from MEA headquarters in Lansing.

Class size is also mentioned a few times in the e-mails, but with less vigor or determination. The entire issue is confusing, because the last contract negotiated between Wayne-Westland teachers and the district included a mutually-accepted increase in class sizes.

On the transcript of one negotiating session, a district representative asked a union bargainer how much the lower class size proposal would cost.

"I don't know," was the response.

When asked what increased performance would come from smaller class sizes, the union bargainer again said "I don't know."

In a form-letter style e-mail sent to several teachers in the district, Strachan asks them if they would be willing to testify at a fact-finding hearing regarding the ill-

effects of overcrowded classes.

Teacher Mary DeVine wrote back, "I have never had a class that was overloaded personally. Would this be detrimental to my testimony?"

Strachan replied "No. What I am interested in your case (is) the difference between what your classes were like prior to this last contract where we bargained to raise class sizes."

If class sizes are such a general problem in the district, couldn't Strachan find teachers to testify who actually have overcrowded classes? Don't be surprised if the final contract negotiated by the teachers union doesn't address class size at all.

Free thought not welcome

It's no surprise that last October's illegal teacher strike in Wayne-Westland, the first in Michigan outside of Detroit in nearly two decades, did not sit well with every teacher in the district.

But the e-mails show that teachers who dared to disagree with the strategy were treated poorly by their colleagues.

One teacher who apparently crossed the picket line received an e-mail stating "Thank you for your service on curriculum council. The executive board met yesterday to approve the tentative list of members and you were not approved to serve the remainder of your term."

The teacher then e-mailed to Strachan, "Please give me the reason I'm being asked not to be part of the council. I realize the WWEA asked the membership to strike and break the law that prohibits teachers from striking. Is this retaliation for my refusal to strike and my unwillingness to break the law?"

We found no copy of a return e-mail from Strachan.

Another teacher, in an e-mail to Strachan, stressed her long-time service to the district and her devotion to the union, but said she couldn't afford to risk losing her job by participating in an illegal strike.

"Some members have been outright intimidating to those they feel do not give 100 percent support," the teacher wrote. "It is not that teachers do not want to support the union 100 percent, but they are in turmoil over the possible outcomes. It is terrible to see a teacher confronting another for their supposed lack of support. This is not unity."

Kicking and screaming

Many of the e-mails clearly expose the teachers' anger at the school administration, and how that anger spills out in childish ways that students can't help but notice.

In one e-mail, a union official referred to a rumor that the administration was planning to use "the Al Qaeda method of firing 25 teacher hostages at a time. ... Terrorists can only win if we capitulate to them."

In stark contrast to Al Qaeda, one teacher compared the union's effort to those of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Mohandas Gandhi.

Another e-mail from a teacher refers to the district's website as "Propaganda Central."

Two of the teachers who authored several of the e-mails, Thomas Donnelly and Mary Ernat, are a part of the current effort to recall the school board president and vice president.

A memo from a union official reminded Wayne-Westland teachers that they were expected to continue wearing black on Fridays until further notice.

One teacher e-mailed Strachan, asking whether regular Wednesday meetings between administration and staff were continuing. Strachan responded morbidly "With the bad blood between union and management we do not have our regular Wednesday meetings."

Another e-mail from a teacher to Strachan inquired about the proposed establishment of a school retail store as a marketing class for students, with staff oversight.

"I would hope that management feels the marketing program is vital and important to our students," the teacher wrote.

"I have said this many times that they should not open the store at all," Strachan responded. "If that doesn't get notice, what else will? Community pressure can make a difference."

We have to wonder if the quality of instruction has suffered a bit during the union's ongoing pouting period.