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Stop trashing schoolteachers

IRIS SALTERS

When one voice speaks, our elected leaders don't always listen.

When a handful of people raise their voices, our legislators might take notice.

But when thousands of people in cities and towns across Michigan speak out in one collective voice, they cannot be ignored.

That's exactly what happened on Monday night, when school employees, parents and local leaders held rallies in communities around the state to send a clear message to Lansing: It's time for stable, equitable and adequate funding for Michigan's public schools.

It's time to stop balancing the budget on the backs of teachers and support staff, who have already saved the state almost a billion dollars in concessions in the last three years alone.

It's time to stop the attacks on our public schools and the dedicated people who work in them.

The media spends countless column inches deriding teachers and school employees, blaming them for everything from the poor decades-long budget decisions our state legislators made, to the failure to sign on to a blank contract in the first round of Michigan's attempt at federal Race to the Top funds.

But when those same educators work diligently to craft Race to the Top reforms that actually make sense -- like the MEA just did, where is the acknowledgment? When they volunteer to accept concessions that save the district millions -- like school employees in Livonia just did -- where is the recognition of sacrifices made?

The recently passed school employee retirement bill is a perfect example. If any other group of taxpaying citizens were told they were about to be forced to give up an additional 3 percent of their income to fund retiree health care without any guarantee that health care would be available to them in retirement, they'd call it what it is, a tax hike -- and there would be public outcry.

Instead -- just weeks later -- our Legislature is already looking for more ways to shortchange our schools and the people who work in them.

It's time to draw on the knowledge and experience our educators have to share what really works to help struggling schools. But most of all, it's time to restore civility and a sense of respect when we talk about the people entrusted with educating our children -- Michigan's future.

Thousands raised their voices with that message on Monday night. Ten thousand more will speak out at a massive rally on June 24 at the state Capitol. And all will make their voices heard at the ballot box during the critical elections in August and November.

Lansing, are you listening?

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Additional Facts

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. Look for Labor Voices every Wednesday in The Detroit News.

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