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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Teachers do work during summer

Lack of state aid forces staff to pay for updating skills, other training



School's out for the summer – and that's welcome news to students everywhere.

School employees look forward to this time of year, too. For some, it's time to go to school – college, that is – to build skills that help in the classroom. For others, it's an opportunity to work on major projects, such as rewriting curriculum. And many school employees, including custodians and maintenance workers, continue to work during the summer, getting schools ready to open in the fall.

While most have time for a few rounds of golf, reconnecting with family or walking barefoot in the sand, those carefree moments are often sandwiched between college courses, studying or attending workshops and other professional development pursuits. Teachers recognize such summer work as a necessary and important part of the profession, but it's often overlooked by those outside of the school community.

Teachers prepare for fall

In addition to more formal training, scores of teachers teach summer school, take jobs related to their areas of expertise or work other jobs to supplement their income.

With the exception of teachers with specific job responsibilities during the summer (such as teaching summer school), teachers aren't compensated for the summer months.

The same is true for most educational support personnel. Some support staff – including custodians, secretaries and teacher aides – spend at least part of the summer working, cleaning buildings, completing reports and ordering supplies, or helping with summer school.

I am constantly amazed at the great things that happen after school recesses and before the first bells ring in the fall. This year is no exception, considering responses to a recent informal survey of some Michigan Education Association members. We heard from teachers and school support staff who plan to:

Set up a new classroom, read several books to help with a new job assignment and write lesson plans for new courses.

Attend educational conferences.

Teach summer school, staff a school weight room for athletes several evenings a week or provide respite care for families of students with special needs.

Attend a conference to help a district achieve North Central Accreditation and work on a school team to help in that process.

Preview books for the school library to make sure they're age-appropriate for elementary students and prepare "book talks" for the new school year.

Work at a district-sponsored summer program for at-risk kids.

Teachers fund own training

I bet a lot of people would be surprised to learn that much of the professional development pursued during the summer months by teachers and school support employees is paid for out-of-pocket – not with public funds. Due to insufficient state funding, public schools don't have enough money to adequately help all employees receive necessary training.

Our state should increase funding for professional development for all public school employees, which would surely improve student achievement. Research has found that students learn more when they work with teachers and school employees who are rigorously trained in their areas of expertise.

School employees spend millions of dollars of their own money every summer to build their skills. If each public school teacher conservatively spends just \$50 on their own professional development this summer, the investment will exceed \$5 million.

Teachers and other school employees spend their own money because they're devoted to doing the very best they can for their students. They recognize the importance of keeping up with changing technology, evolving teaching

practices and emerging research in math, science and other important academic subjects. They know they must advance their skills to help students progress in the 21st century.

Preparing students for success in life is a challenging job. It doesn't fit neatly into a 40-hour work week most of the year.

If you ask a teacher, he or she will probably tell you that the job demands 10-hour days and plenty of nights and weekends to keep up with lesson plans, grading papers, parent communication and other requirements of the job.

So summer, even when punctuated with job-related training, reading or work, can also provide time to restore and rejuvenate.

June, July and August aren't the best reasons for a job in education – the bright smiles and inquiring minds of our students are. But these months help teachers and school employees do their very best come the beginning of the new school year.

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Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written for The News 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. The News hopes to provide a forum for discussing workplace issues that are critical to a large segment of Michigan's population, whether or not they are union members. Look for Labor Voices every Friday in The Detroit News.

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