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Iris Salters: Labor Voices

Salters: Michigan teachers already sacrifice for students



You can feel it in the air -- the excitement that comes as students, teachers and support staff get ready to begin a new school year. Unfortunately, that excitement is tempered with a great deal of uncertainty this fall because many public school employees don't have contracts or a clear vision from Lansing.

But it's not stopping Michigan's public school teachers from buying pencils and paper and many other things their students will need. On average, teachers here spend \$500 of their own money for school supplies for their students. We know it's not stopping parents from spending a great deal as well, and we are grateful for the support they give all year long.

But teachers and parents are not alone in their determination to make schools the best they can be despite difficult circumstances.

The uncertainty isn't stopping school custodians from putting that last coat of paint on the walls so the hallways are fresh and clean for students.

It's not stopping school secretaries, many of whom have already reported to work to take questions over class assignments or to guide new enrollees.

And it's not stopping public school employees from keeping their focus where it belongs -- on the students they serve each and every day.

We've heard a lot from politicians lately about what they'd like school employees to give up. However, few are talking about the sacrifices we've already made and the ones we continue to make so our students don't suffer cuts to programs they desperately need.

From salary and wage freezes to agreeing to pay more for health care costs, public school employees are doing their part, just like many others.

In Garden City, where the district has faced a budget deficit for several years, teachers agreed to forgo scheduled raises to temporarily relieve some of the financial burden. Virtually every unionized school employee in Avondale did the same thing.

Paraprofessionals and support staff in Wayne County and teachers in Madison Heights have all agreed to wage freezes during the past few years. In other areas of the state, school employees took pay cuts.

And like many people across Michigan, public school employees in Birmingham, Northville and Huron Valley are all devoting a bigger chunk of their income to health insurance, with many seeing their prescription costs, deductibles and co-pays for doctor visits increase substantially.

These examples are just a small fraction of the sacrifices public school employees are making to help their school districts across the state. Added together, wage and salary concessions saved Michigan schools \$200 million in the last three years. Givebacks in health insurance costs saved taxpayers another \$700 million.

That's almost a billion dollars that public school employees have provided in savings. We've done it without fanfare and never asked for thanks in return. We understand that many employees in the private sector across our state are making similar sacrifices, and we empathize.

But as we once again see politicians and would-be pundits try to balance the budget on the backs of public employees, we feel the need to share our story. Parents, community leaders and concerned citizens should know that we do care, that we have given and we will, no doubt, continue to give.

Public school employees won't be stopped in our dedication to the students and families we serve. But we're also hoping many will recognize what we've done to help and realize cannot do it alone.

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