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Iris Salters: Labor voices

Teachers aren't punching bags

Public school employees share in sacrifices of lean budgets



You can always tell when it's campaign season.

Negative comments from politicians circulate about our schools, teachers and the people who work to support them. Some politicians treat educators and support staff like political punching bags, a practice that intensifies as the election draws closer.

This practice is counterproductive and even damaging. It's easy to blame those on the front lines for the shortcomings of our education system, but it's a lot harder to do something to remedy the situation. That requires political will, sacrifice and investment.

These are tough times, and all of us must come to grips with leaner budgets and the reality of doing more with less. Our school employees have led by example, sharing in the sacrifices that come with difficult times: salary freezes, benefit cuts and layoffs.

Anyone involved with education has had to do more with less for a long time now -- but at what cost to Michigan's students?

Some educators wear multiple hats instead of focusing on the job they were hired to do. Teachers are expected to be counselors, nurses and psychiatrists -- dispensing medications and relationship advice because the school nurse or counselor position has been cut to save money.

Michigan teachers on average spend \$443 out of pocket on classroom supplies that districts can't afford to buy -- such as paper and pencils. Many other important learning tools don't get purchased because of their high cost, especially up-to-date textbooks and technology that

supports student learning.

Worst of all, class size is on the rise, denying students the individual attention that helps them stay engaged in their education and reach new levels of achievement.

Teachers and school employees do some of the most important work in our country but don't get enough credit or help. From the moment the school bus door swings open to transport students safely to school, it is the teachers, administrators and support staff who protect and nurture our children. They provide a safe environment in which to learn. They feed students hot, nutritious lunches and keep hallways and classrooms clean. They ensure schools are a good environment where students can focus on learning.

Rather than demonizing school employees, we should find ways to give them the tools to do their jobs and prepare our children for the demanding job market.

Michigan's students will have to compete in a global marketplace. To succeed, they must be prepared and armed with the skills to compete. Teachers need the tools to help students achieve their goals -- and that starts with the basic concept of respect in the classroom, a process that must begin at home. Teachers can't teach and students can't learn if the teacher spends more time on disciplinary issues than teaching.

Instead of lashing out at teachers and support staff, political candidates should join forces with these dedicated employees. Together, we can develop plans that keep students in school and working toward college or other training for 21st-century jobs.

It is our responsibility as educators to raise the bar and challenge each student to achieve new, higher goals. Our political leaders have the same responsibility. By working together we can accomplish our mutual mission.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff.

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