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## Schools workers show giving spirit during holidays

*IRIS SALTERS*

As we come to the close of 2009, there are very few of us who would like to repeat this year -- at least in the financial sense. Many Michiganians are suffering with the loss of jobs and homes. Even more have lost their sense of financial security.

Our schools are suffering, too. The failure of our Legislature to find sufficient resources to fund our children's education is affecting every school in the state. Valuable school staff are being laid off, cuts are being made and programs are being eliminated. It affects all of us, and it's not easy.

But facing challenges head on is exactly what public school employees do.

So as this holiday season began, thousands of teachers, paraprofessionals, bus drivers, custodians and food service personnel across the state looked around their communities and decided that nurturing students inside their schools just wasn't enough. They wanted to make sure that when the students walked out the door, they had the basic necessities to get them through the season.

Employees from St. Clair Shores to Novi, from Wyandotte to Clarkston reached out, coordinated food drives, gathered warm clothing and spearheaded donations for needy families in their own backyards.

In Macomb County, a group of teachers collected more than \$6,000 for homeless students in their districts. It was an effort that hit close to home for one of the group's organizers, Clintondale teacher Ken Austin. During one Christmas when Austin was growing up, his family was forced to move in with relatives after losing their home. He said it saddens him to see so many students now facing that same situation.

Michigan's employment and foreclosure crisis is forcing many to go without even the very basics this holiday season -- this is becoming far too common for today's students and the people who have dedicated their careers to working with them.

That's why teachers and staff in Calhoun County organized a food drive for their former colleagues -- support staff whose jobs were outsourced earlier this year.

That's why the staff at Comstock Northeast Middle School in Comstock decided to "adopt" a family with children this holiday season. It's why, just a few miles away, Sveri May organized a massive mitten and winter clothing drive for needy and homeless students in the Kalamazoo area. And that's why, up in West Branch and Mt. Pleasant, school employees filled trucks and buses with food that went straight into the pantries of many of their own students.

Michigan is hurting. But school employees in Michigan are doing what we've always done. We are educating and caring for the next generation.

Sometimes that means teaching students to read. And sometimes that means teaching them what being part of a community is all about.

The Michigan Education Association urges you to teach your own children that lesson this holiday season. Reach out and show them that despite our own challenges, we can come together -- as a neighborhood, a community, a state -- and lend a hand to one another.

And perhaps that spirit will bring a better 2010 to all of us.

*Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff. E-mail letters to [letters@detroitnews.com](mailto:letters@detroitnews.com)">[letters@detroitnews.com](mailto:letters@detroitnews.com).*

## Additional Facts

### Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamsters 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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