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The Negotiator

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Knowledge has value

In every aspect of our lives we appreciate the value of knowledge.

Our appreciation for knowledge also provides value for us as MEA members. One key area is collective bargaining for our members' financial security. How have we been doing lately representing ourselves at the bargaining table?

Then

Let's look back a few years and inventory our bargaining success. Let's start with the year the Bee Gees dominated the charts with "Saturday Night Fever," and the Blues Brothers had just made their first appearance on Saturday Night Live. Jimmy Carter was President and while we may have been a little worried about that thing called "inflation", most of us were feeling pretty good about 6% raises and our fully paid health insurance. The year was 1978.

Now

Let's fast forward to 2008. This year local association

salary settlements average 1.9% statewide. Over 40% of us are paying a portion of our health benefits and if you are a support staff employee you are constantly being threatened with the privatization of your job.

Choose

What can we do? We can make a choice.

That choice is simple. We can keep doing what we have been doing, but as Ben Franklin said, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." The other possibility is that we can take a hard look at what is not working and either fix it, or abandon it.

Since most of us probably don't see insanity as a viable option, let's take a look at another way.

Our employers have been very successful in convincing us that they do not have enough money to afford higher salaries and also pay the "skyrocketing" costs of employee benefits. Superintendents,

school boards, and the people who represent them have sold all of us—parents, community leaders and employees—on a simple message...

Public schools are broke and it's your fault!

The irony is that as school districts have repeated this message, they have also quietly built a statewide general fund surplus—money put under the mattress for the rainy day that never comes. That fund has more than tripled over the last 15 years.

So, what can we do?

We intend to inform you of the true state of school district finances. We intend to remind everyone of the true value of public education. We will be asking you to help us spread the word that knowledge has value.



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Knowledge Has Value for Holland Public Schools



The gnome grasps the "mantra" of the MEA Northern Zone: Knowledge Has Value. Look for the gnome in upcoming issues and events.

Both teachers and the board took actions to put in place a more favorable and fact-based climate to begin this round of negotiations.

Just two years ago, the Holland Public Schools were embroiled in a bitter and costly negotiation. The board of education received a presentation from the attorney they ultimately hired for that negotiation. They strategized all winter on how to launch a full scale PR campaign to "spread the truth" about how the district was about to go belly-up because of "out of control" health care costs. The attorney, Barb Ruga, advised them to make projections that show the current benefit and salary costs are unsustainable. The newspapers were flooded with articles and quotes from the superintendent, state politicians, and others, praising the district for what "it had to do."

After almost 13 months of negotiating, two contract impositions by the board, and numerous legal battles, the Holland teachers settled a three-year contract that grew their salary schedule by only 2 percent (0.5%, 1%, and 0.5%), and began paying \$40/month in 06-07 and \$60/month in 07-08 for a negotiated MESSA Choices II plan. They had previously had Super Care I, fully-paid, but had taken two years of salary freezes in order to preserve this benefit.

Both the teachers and the board desired a different fate when their contractual agreement expired at the end of this school year. They both took actions to put in place a more favorable and fact-based climate to begin this round of ne-

gotiations.

Beginning with the 2006-2007 school year, the board restructured the district programs in a manner that was more desirable to the community and which allowed the district to operate more efficiently. This created annual surpluses of well over \$2,000,000 for each of the past two years.

Additionally, the Holland Education Association (HEA) realized that one of the problems from the last round of bargaining had to do with how little their team communicated hard facts and costs with their members.

"The board and their attorney were delivering false cost and revenue projections to (everyone)," said HEA chief bargainer Jon Toppen. "We had always kind of followed Vegas Rules with the district when it came to communicating bargaining information prior to this," added Toppen.

But Vegas Rules were over. Throughout the remainder of the 2005-2008 contract, the HEA bargainers communicated cost analyses, projection discrepancies, and audit information to its members. They did this during their monthly association meetings, as well as on their blog and website (www.hollandea.org) There was no mistaking that the money was looking good due to some responsible actions by the board, and that the HEA had taken hits from the

last negotiation that shouldn't be repeated this time.

"The district knew how much we knew about their finances and projected revenues and costs through informal meetings with them throughout this school year," noted Toppen. "We made it clear that the going rate for contracts in our county was the expectation," he added.

In March, the HEA negotiators were invited to an informal meeting to "discuss" the possibility of putting together a new contract agreement. After about four hours of negotiations, the teachers got a new three-year contract similar to the average for the county. Their schedule will grow 6% over the next three years and their insurance contribution has been cut from \$60/month back to \$40/month. And, the district's surplus is projected to grow over the next 3 years as well.

"We shouldn't be paying anything for our MESSA plan," said Toppen. "Our current plan has created over \$250,000 in savings compared to the plan the board imposed on us two and a half years ago," continues Toppen. "I guess we'll have to see that our members are more knowledgeable of this and other facts the next time we bargain," concluded Toppen.

We can credit both the HPS and the HEA for valuing knowledge.

Tell Us Your Story

Millions of Americans have experienced the value of knowledge. We know that public school employees make a difference in people’s lives every day. Tell us your story!

To enter the contest, email us a text or .doc file telling us how education made a difference in your life. Please include your full real name and contact information.

When you submit, verify that you agree to allow us to post your story on the www.knowledgehasvalue web site and in other publications.

Email your entry to contest@knowledgehasvalue.com.

We know that knowledge has value—help us spread the word.

Earnings vary greatly throughout Northern Zone

⇒ **TEACHERS:**

BA Min	Alba \$26,561	Orchard View \$38,537
MA Min	Alba \$28,587	Newaygo ISD \$41, 934

⇒ **BUS DRIVERS:**

Wolverine \$21.93/hour	Baldwin \$10.12/hour
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⇒ **CUSTODIANS:**

Orchard View \$19.90/hour	North Central \$10.05/hour
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⇒ **INSTRUCTIONAL AIDES:**

Delta-Schoolcraft \$18.85/hour	Littlefield \$8.37/hour
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(2006-07 figures, MEA Research Department)

Do wages for members in over 300 Northern Zone EA, ESP and Higher Ed local affiliates vary? You bet! Yet most districts receive the same per pupil state funding.



Ask a school board member:
Can you name three school bus drivers and a middle school science teacher?

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Holland EA Bargaining Team members were happy about the recent settlement. Lisa Garcia-Veele, Mary Busscher, Maria Yoder and Geoff Legg, pictured with the NZ Gnome, worked tirelessly to achieve the three-year contract, Chief Negotiator Jon Toppen and HEA President Charles Bullard are not pictured.