United We Stand
Coalition Building for EA and ESP Locals
The Bundle of Sticks from Aesop’s Fables

Once there was a farmer with many sons who were always fighting and quarreling amongst themselves. One day he called his sons together. Before him lay a bundle of sticks tied together.

He directed each son to pick up the bundle of sticks and break it in two. Each son tried and each one failed. Then the father untied the bundle and gave his sons the sticks to break one by one. They did this with ease.

“My sons,” said the farmer, “by this example you can see that there is strength in being together. But once you quarrel and are separated, you are easily destroyed.”

Moral: In unity there is strength.
Dear Local Leader,

Times are tough in Michigan’s public schools and for public school employees. As the economy worsens and costs increase, funding for public education has decreased. Many school districts have chosen to stretch their resources and balance their budgets on the backs of school employees. Even worse, many have become convinced that firing MEA members and hiring private companies will save them money while allowing them to maintain the same high level of service, quality and expertise that they have come to expect from our members.

While our ESP members are the current targets of most of these attempts, it is becoming increasingly evident that EA members are soon to follow, since the services of substitute teachers, social workers and school psychologists are now being provided by private companies in some school districts.

The battle to save members’ jobs and protect their rights is under way, and it will be won at the local level by local associations that understand the need to join together and act as one to protect all members’ interests.

This booklet focuses on helping local EA and ESP units form coalitions within a school district for the purpose of:

■ **fighting privatization.**
■ **bargaining better contracts.**
■ **becoming stronger politically.**

This information, ideas and resources from staff and leaders around the state can be adapted to fit the needs of the local associations involved.

This booklet and other materials, information and support designed to strengthen your local and get more members actively engaged are available by contacting MEA Field Services at 800-292-1934 ext. 2941, or by downloading from www.mea.org/BFCL.

In a time of divide and conquer, it is time to stand and unite!
What Is a Coalition?

Simply put, a coalition is a group of organizations joined together around certain issues to achieve common goals.

A coalition is a way of increasing power and leverage. Some situations that may be difficult or impossible for a local association to overcome alone can be handled very successfully and effectively by acquiring the right allies.

A coalition can be a formal group with scheduled meetings, a defined governance structure, etc., or it can be informal and come together on an “as needed” basis to share information and strategies.

Why Create a Coalition?

- To increase credibility and visibility
- To fight privatization
- To bargain better contracts
- To elect education-friendly school board members
- To share information
- To respond to education policy/legislation (e.g. AYP, NCLB)
- To become more POWERFUL!

Key Questions to Think about before Forming a Coalition:

- What are the unifying issues and goals?
- What outcomes do you hope to see from this coalition?
- What obstacles might you encounter?
Building a Coalition

1. Building a successful coalition begins with selecting and including people who have the expertise and experience to ensure the success of your coalition. Including your MEA UniServ director is essential as he/she is experienced and knows how to access the other staff, resources and information you’ll need.

2. Identify a core group of key EA and ESP leaders. Bringing key leadership into the coalition in the beginning gets them interested and invested. Involving leadership also gives credibility to the coalition and promotes cooperation and constructive problem-solving.

3. Bring the core group of staff and leaders together to identify the issues and to develop the mission or purpose for the coalition as well as to set some preliminary goals.

4. Recruit other coalition partners. Be sure to recruit all potentially interested and like-minded groups who may stand to gain either directly or indirectly by supporting the coalition.

5. Bring the coalition partners together to establish a shared vision, determine the roles and responsibilities of those involved and develop mutual goals and a realistic plan of action. It is suggested that you formalize the purpose and goals of the coalition by developing a written agreement that is signed by all coalition partners.

Recruiting Coalition Partners

Face-to-face meetings are the most effective way to get other locals to join the coalition. They allow for open dialogue and provide the opportunity for leaders from interested locals to get the information they need to help in the decision-making process.

It is very important that the organizers of the coalition be clear about how the coalition can help other locals and how the locals will be enhanced by being involved.

The organizers must be prepared to discuss the following with each potential local partner:

- How issues and goals to be pursued are best handled by a coalition rather than through current efforts.
- The immediate and long-range benefits of joining the coalition.
- The specific impact the local is likely to experience because of the coalition effort.
- The effect that the specific local can have on the coalition.
- The major decisions that must be made about the coalition (goals, activities, decision-making process, roles and responsibilities, etc.).
Guidelines for Building a Successful Coalition of Local Associations

1. Choose unifying issues. The most effective coalitions come together around a common issue. The development of coalition goals must be a joint process rather than one or two locals deciding on the goals and then inviting others to join.

2. Understand and respect each other’s self-interest. There must be a balance between the goals and needs of the coalition and those of the individual locals.

3. Respect each other’s internal processes (bylaws, decision-making structure, etc.).

4. Understand each other’s unique values, history, interests, agendas, etc.

5. Agree to disagree.

6. Give careful thought to how decisions will be made and by whom.

7. Distribute credit fairly. Recognize that contributions vary and appreciate them all. Each local will have something different to offer.

8. Be prepared to give and take. It is important to build on existing relationships and connections with other locals. Don’t just ask for support—be prepared to give it!

9. Develop a common strategy. The strength of a coalition is in its unity. Work together with other locals to develop a strategy that makes sense for everyone. The activities that you choose should be ones that all locals can support. If not, the activity should be taken by an individual local outside of the coalition. However, the coalition should be kept apprised of the activity.

10. Be strategic in terms of putting your coalition together. Think about which locals to ask, who will do the asking, in which order they will be asked, etc.

11. Ensure consistency by sending the same representative(s) to coalition meetings and empower them to make decisions.

12. Formalize your coalition. Make sure all members understand their responsibilities and rights. Being clear can help prevent conflict.

The above information was adapted from the NGLTF’s “Comprehensive Manual for Campus Organizing” (Shepard, Yeskel, Outcelt—1995)
Coalitions that Succeed…

The most successful coalitions share a number of important elements:

**Strong Leadership**—It is very important that those who lead the coalition are well-respected, communicate openly and honestly with coalition members, and actively seek input and expertise from others.

**Member awareness and engagement**—The real strength of any coalition lies in the commitment of the rank-and-file members of the local associations. Local leaders need to continuously communicate with their members and regularly assess their commitment to the coalition’s goals and their willingness to act collectively.

**Clear mission, vision and goals**—Having a clearly defined purpose, as well as a clear picture of what the end result will look like, is critical to a successful coalition. Further, the goals that the coalition sets should be clear, reasonable, and attainable within a reasonable time frame and allow all members of the coalition to be successful.

**Diverse and adequate resources and support**—Successful coalitions have the funding, information, materials and human resources that are necessary to support their efforts. In addition, it is critical that the coalition has access to those who have the expertise in both process and content in order to move forward.

**Ongoing communication**—Communication between all individuals and locals that are a part of the coalition is critically important. Communication should be clear, honest and ongoing. Good communication will prevent duplication of effort, increase cooperation between coalition members, and strengthen individual and collective determination to achieve coalition goals.

**Action oriented**—Talk is cheap! Successful coalitions are active and spend a good deal of time involving members in events, activities and experiences that further the goals of the coalition.
Coalitions That Fail…

Coalitions that fail usually exhibit one or more of the following characteristics:

**Lack of leadership commitment**—This often happens when leaders are brought in after the fact, are not consulted or included in the initial stages of building the coalition, fail to buy in to or agree with the coalition’s goals, or put self-interest above the well-being of the group.

**Lack of member support**—It is very important that local leaders gauge member commitment and support for the coalition prior to committing to it and while involved in it. The major strength of a successful coalition is in its ability to mobilize its members into collective activity (having a compelling issue is a necessity for this). Open, ongoing communication with members regarding the coalition is critical.

**Inadequate planning**—Careful, thorough planning is critical in order for a coalition to achieve its goals. A plan of action must be detailed, address each group’s unique needs, undergo vetting by all coalition members, be in writing, and include the necessary resources and manpower for successful implementation.

**Lack of a compelling issue**—In order to have a successful coalition, members must have a meaningful, important issue around which to direct their efforts. A compelling issue is the foundation upon which a successful coalition rests.

**Poor communication**—Failure to communicate regularly, accurately and honestly with all coalition members is guaranteed to create major problems. Communication must flow evenly between all parties.

**Insufficient resources**—Having the necessary resources in place prior to undertaking any coalition action is very important. Behind a successful coalition are the necessary knowledge, manpower and financial resources needed to support the coalition’s work.

**Turf issues**—Conflict or non-cooperation between locals in a coalition without resolution can lead to a rapid disintegration of a coalition.

For more on turf battles, see the next section.
“Turf-ism” is the non-cooperation or conflict between groups with seemingly common goals or interests (also known as a power struggle).

Turf battles can happen because of conflicting interests, scarcity of resources, domination of one group over another, lack of clarity in direction, etc.

Long term, it is much better to avoid turf battles in the first place than to have to deal with them later. The best way to do this is at the very beginning of the coalition-building process—before you initiate or become a member of a coalition.

Keeping the following in mind will go a long way in avoiding a turf battle:

- A coalition’s goals are never 100 percent compatible with the goals of each local association. Accordingly, each partner must be prepared to compromise or modify his/her commitment to specific goals and to help other partners adjust as necessary.
- Enough time should be spent in the beginning to clarify coalition goals and develop each partner’s commitment to them. The higher the sense of common purpose, the higher the probability of a harmonious relationship between partners.
- Knowing the relationship between the partners’ personal and local association goals and the coalition’s goals can suggest potential sources of agreement and disagreement and produce results.
- Between-meeting communication among partners before a proposed action helps avoid surprises and helps make meetings more productive.
- Structured subgroups may eliminate the disadvantage of limited interaction time between partners of a large coalition who might need more clarification on issues.
- Effective listening and communication skills will eliminate misunderstandings.
- Knowledge of the political climate and member attitudes within each local association will help partners better understand each other and be more sensitive to each other’s needs.
- The best results come when all partners jointly take credit and share in the results.
Building a Strong Coalition of EA and ESP Locals in Your School District

Use the following as a guide to start framing your thoughts about building a coalition.

Why do you want to form a coalition?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What do you want to achieve?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Identify potential coalition partners:
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

Identify key leaders who need to be included in the initial planning:
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are the benefits of joining the coalition?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are the potential roadblocks to creating a coalition?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________

What are some perceptions/preconceived ideas that will need to be overcome in order to have a successful coalition?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________________________
Identifying the Issues

The first step in building a strong coalition is to determine the issue(s) on which the coalition will focus its efforts. Below are two survey-type activities that can be used to help determine those issues.

**Finding Common Ground**

The following is a list of topics common among public school employees. For each topic, indicate whether it is an issue for EA members, ESP members or both. From the list identified as issues for BOTH, select the three most important common issues and rank them with 1 being the most important and 3 being the least.

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<th>EA</th>
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<th>Both</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Subcontracting/Privatization</td>
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<td>Bond/Millage Passage</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>School Budget Process</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Inservice/Training</td>
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Is Your Local Association a Target for Privatization?

This questionnaire is designed to help locals evaluate the potential for privatization of services in their district. This is a very good place to start when making the case for forming a coalition of locals in your district.

YES  NO  1. Has there been recent turnover in any key administrative positions, e.g., food service or transportation director, superintendent, business manager, etc.?

YES  NO  2. If you have a new administrator, does he/she have a history of privatizing school services?

YES  NO  3. Has there been a change of leadership on the school board?

YES  NO  4. Have any administrators or school board members publicly supported or expressed an interest in privatizing any support service?

YES  NO  5. Are there privatization advocates within your area Chamber of Commerce or in neighboring school districts?

YES  NO  6. Have any district supervisors/administrators been sent to observe service programs in other districts?

YES  NO  7. Are unfamiliar people in suits walking around district buildings observing and carrying clipboards?

YES  NO  8. Are performance audits or efficiency or cost comparison studies being conducted?

YES  NO  9. Have off-schedule inventories been conducted?

YES  NO  10. Are any private contractors or consultants making presentations to the school board?

YES  NO  11. Have there been an excessive number of grievances filed or disputes originating in one particular department?

YES  NO  12. Are there other signs that a particular department is operating poorly, such as high absenteeism, high turnover of personnel, low morale?

YES  NO  13. In the last round of bargaining, did management demand concessions in benefits, salary, work rules, seniority or staffing?

YES  NO  14. If yes, were these related to specific departments?

YES  NO  15. Did the issue of privatization or contracting out come up during your last round of bargaining?

YES  NO  16. Does your insurance cost equal 75 percent or more of your salary cost?

YES  NO  17. Would your school board members characterize their current relationship with your local as hostile?

YES  NO  18. Would the superintendent characterize his/her relationship with your local as hostile?

YES  NO  19. Is the administration or school board talking about “cost containment”?

YES  NO  20. Is your district currently facing a budget deficit and/or budget problems?

If you answered YES to five or more of these questions, it is time to start putting together a coalition of locals in your district to undertake the effort of launching a proactive campaign against privatization.
The Most Successful Coalitions Are Action Oriented!

What follows is a sample of the successful ideas and activities that EA/ESP coalitions around the state have tried. Some are simple and can be implemented quickly and easily, some are more complicated and will require more time and resources. All are designed to help local associations:

- fight privatization
- bargain better contracts
- increase political strength
- respond to education policy and legislation

If your focus is on increasing member awareness and support for the coalition:

- Host a coalition get-together at a local watering hole or plan a “party with a purpose” to bring all members together.
- Plan an event that brings together all new EA and ESP members in the district.
- Publish a joint newsletter.
- Hold regular meetings of EA and ESP presidents and their UniServ directors for the purpose of discussing concerns and sharing information.
- Create and distribute a list of all EA and ESP association representatives in each building/work site so that they know who they are and can work together to share information and resolve issues in each building.
- Create a coalition website that is updated regularly.
- Ensure that all members are aware of the purpose, importance and goals of the coalition through regular email updates or the creation of a blog.
- EA and ESP leaders should attend trainings and conferences together.
- Align governance documents so that election days, terms of office, etc., are similar. Share ballot boxes and assist each other with elections.
- Develop and publish a calendar that contains all coalition, as well as all local events, meetings, etc., for the year.
- Develop a list of members who are willing to volunteer to do various things. This can be done by having members fill out volunteer cards that identify the things they are willing to do, as well as supply information on special skills, etc.
- Recruit EA and ESP colleagues to run for office and serve in leadership roles.
- Recognize outstanding members at an end-of-the-year awards dinner hosted by all coalition partners. Awards should be given to members from each partner local.
- Local presidents should attend each other’s board meetings as observers.
- Plan trainings throughout the year for coalition members that focus on strategies and information that will help the coalition achieve its goals.
If your focus is on increasing visibility and encouraging support for school employees in the community (a proactive way to head off privatization):

- EA and ESP presidents should attend all school board meetings together. At the appropriate point in the meeting, each should make a few positive comments about what is going on in the district by highlighting student-focused projects or activities that involve employees.
- Create and distribute placemats that are imprinted with the names of all graduating seniors or contain information about the school district and its employees.
- Build or sponsor a float in the community parade.
- Increase awareness of the importance of school employees by sponsoring an information booth at community events.
- Pass out imprinted bags of popcorn at a school sporting event.
- Create and distribute brochures that contain:
  - back-to-school information
  - Halloween safety tips
  - school and community contact information
  - tips for how to help your child succeed in school
  - information on successful parent conferences
  - health and nutrition information
  - bus safety tips
- Actively support a local charity organization such as a homeless shelter, food bank, etc., and publicize it.
- Hold regular meetings with the superintendent that include all local presidents to discuss mutual concerns.
- Hold a door-to-door campaign where EA and ESP members visit homes in the community to talk to residents about the great local public schools and their commitment to children.
- Create public relations posters that highlight the work of district employees and distribute these to local businesses for display.
- Partner with the district’s communications or public affairs staff to develop and distribute materials that highlight the dedication and commitment of the district’s staff.
- Create and maintain a relationship with the local media.
If your focus is on political action:

- Plan and hold a yearly coalition PAC drive.
- Get actively involved in school board elections.
- Include both EA and ESP members on all candidate screening and recommending committees.
- Have a local candidates night sponsored by the coalition.
- Use PAC dollars to pay for yard signs, buttons, literature, etc., in support of coalition-recommended candidates.
- Actively and visibly involve members who live in the community in elections by having them host coffees, display yard signs, pass out literature at various public locations, write letters to the editor, etc.
- Sponsor a coalition phone bank to get out the vote and support coalition-recommended candidates.
- Be sure that all campaign correspondence that is sent out is signed by the presidents of all coalition locals.
- Coalition leaders should regularly meet with school board members during the year to discuss successes, issues and concerns. This is especially important to do with the board members who were recommended by the coalition.
- Actively seek and encourage pro-public education community members to run for the school board.
If your focus is on bargaining:

- Bargain together on specific issues such as health insurance.
- Bargain common expiration dates for all contracts in the same district.
- Prepare for bargaining by having all teams meet together to talk about major issues each faces and to share information and strategies.
- Make sure that bargaining teams are aware of the issues that may impact them as a result of another team’s bargaining. This should happen before bargaining starts and throughout the process.
- Work together during bargaining—pack board meetings together, join together for informational picketing, all wear the same colors, buttons, shirts, etc.
  Send the message that an attack on one is an attack on all.
- Bargain as a wall-to-wall unit. No one unit settles without the other(s). All contracts are settled together.
- Plan a bargaining team training for all coalition partners.
- Presidents of coalition locals can act as observers at each other’s bargaining tables.
- Establish a coalition crisis team with representatives from each local association.
- Form a MABO (Multiple Association Bargaining Organization). This is a formal, ongoing coalition of local associations in a number of districts within a particular geographic area that is created for the purpose of more effective local bargaining and contract maintenance. Contact your UniServ director for more information on this.
BFCL Resources

What do you need?

Start with your UniServ director! He/she has a wealth of information that can help you build a strong coalition of EA and ESP locals. He/she can also help you access the support and service you need from MEA.

Need more copies of this booklet, information on coalition building or other resources designed to help you strengthen your local and get more members involved?

Copies of the following MEA publications are available by contacting MEA Field Services at 800-292-1934, ext. 2941. Many can be downloaded from www.mea.org/bfcl.

- Association/Building Representatives and Stewards: Starting with the Basics
  (*Higher Ed version also available*)
- Communications 101: Developing a Local Communications Strategy that Works
- Getting Strategic: Long-Range Planning for Local Leaders
- Generation Next: Ideas for Engaging New Members in the Association
- Local Self-Assessment: It All Starts Here!
- Parliamentary Procedure for Local Presidents: Keeping It Simple
- Presidents Planning Calendar: A Year in the Life of a Local President
- Processing Gripes and Grievances: What Every Member Advocate Needs to Know!
  (*Higher Ed version also available*)
- United We Stand: Coalition Building for EA and ESP Locals
- You’ve Been Elected... Now What? Local Officers Handbook
You’ve Got Connections!

The MEA Communications and Public Policy Department is a group of talented, creative and dedicated people who want to help you develop and implement a successful local communications plan.

If you need it, just ask!

- Message development and management tailored to your association’s needs.
- Targeted materials designed to help you connect with your new members.
- Crisis PR—we will help you develop a crisis strategy to communicate with members, the community and the media.
- Assorted local materials may be created through MEA Creative Projects. From business cards to placemats to flyers, our award-winning graphic artists serve your design needs free of cost and our in-house print shop features low prices and a large selection of stock. Request a job through your local field office.

Important contact information:

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<tr>
<th>MEA Headquarters</th>
<th>MESSA</th>
<th>MEA Financial Services</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1216 Kendale Blvd.</td>
<td>800-292-4910</td>
<td>800-292-1950</td>
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<tr>
<td>PO Box 2573</td>
<td><a href="http://www.messa.org">www.messa.org</a></td>
<td><a href="http://www.meafs.com">www.meafs.com</a></td>
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<td>East Lansing, MI 48826-2573</td>
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On the phone or online, get answers to your MEA questions.

MEA Help Center
866-MEA-HELP
866-632-4357
www.mea.org
The mission of the MEA is to ensure that the education of our students and the working environments of our members are of the highest quality.