

MEA

VOICE

Seeking Justice for Urban Schools

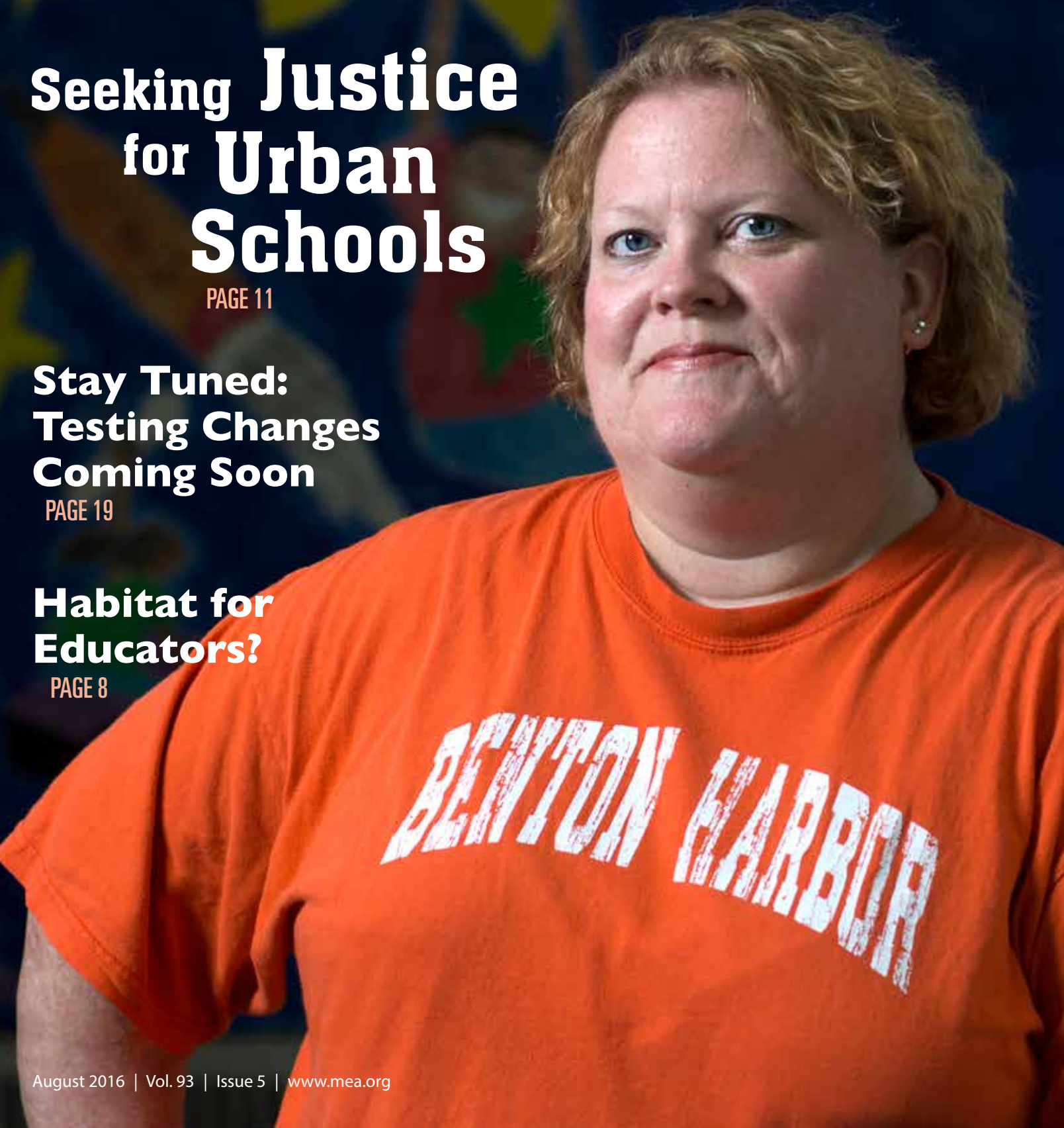
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Members: Let's Send a Message



Dozens of MEA and AFT Michigan members demonstrated outside the offices of Gov. Rick Snyder on the day he chose to file a taxpayer-funded appeal of the 3% case to the Supreme Court.

We hear you! Gov. Rick Snyder's decision to appeal the court case we won in three separate rulings is beyond frustrating. It's appalling and wasteful that he continues to push for a blatantly unconstitutional law that stole millions of dollars from school employees.

MEA will keep fighting, but together we all can effect change in another way: VOTE.

We often talk about the expertise of educators fighting on the front lines. It's the message of our "Ask Me" ad campaign on television and social media. We tell policymakers... Listen to the dedicated school employees who

serve our children, who feel voiceless, who say:

Ask me about best practices. Ask me about kids in poverty. Ask me about special education, assessments, evaluations, and privatization. Ask me how I'm surviving with less pay and rising costs.

But this is a different battle we must wage on another front.

The state and national elections this fall offer the means to send a message to lawmakers who refuse to listen, who continually attack school employees, who are intent on destroying public schools. We simply must elect friends of public education in November.

Over the past six years, we've seen devastating cuts to funding for our schools while for-profit charters were granted free rein to open with no controls, accountability, or requirement to serve all students.

We've seen emergency managers making unilateral decisions, despite a statewide vote in opposition, resulting in the poisoning of Flint water and the neglect of public schools in Detroit and other poor communities of color.

This spring we witnessed damaging DPS legislation passed along party lines—over the objections of elected officials in Detroit and in place of a bipartisan plan that could have healed the divide.

The new law allows anyone to teach in DPS—no degree or training or certification required—a slap in the face of professional educators. And as predicted, it didn't take long for anti-public education forces to push for the uncertified to be unleashed on classrooms across the state, with two editorials appearing in *The Detroit News* within one week of the law's passage.

Then last month Snyder announced he would appeal the 3% retirement case instead of returning money illegally taken from school employees—continuing even more wasteful spending on legal fees.

Our members and retirees need the money they earned to pay bills and buy food and cover college tuition costs. But it isn't just about money. It's about respect and appreciation. No one goes into education in pursuit of riches, but few expect a kick in the teeth for their efforts.

So make education your top issue at the ballot box, and get involved. Contribute to MEA-PAC. Volunteer to make phone calls or ring doorbells for an education-friendly candidate. We've gotten the message from anti-public education policymakers. Now let's make our voices heard. ■



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President



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Secretary-Treasurer

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Election notice: NEA Board of Directors

Delegates to the MEA Fall Representative Assembly (RA) on Saturday, Oct. 8, will choose one new alternate member to the NEA Board of Directors in a special election.

The one new alternate director will fill the vacancy created by Melinda Smith being elected to a full seat at the 2016 Spring RA. The term begins immediately and expires Aug. 31, 2018. Nominations can be made from the floor of the Fall RA. ■

MEA VOICE

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Editor's Notebook

By Brenda Ortega, Editor, MEA Voice

Gratitude hits in the strangest moments. Driving I-94 through Detroit on a hot summer day, I was struck by intense awareness and appreciation of the beauty in everyday life.

I'd just been reporting a story for this issue about a teacher with financial struggles in Algonac, a city on the southern edge of the St. Clair River, and it wasn't exactly a happy story—except somehow it was, and I thought to myself, *It's a privilege to do this job.*

People let me into their lives. They share private thoughts, inner dreams, and personal histories with me—a complete stranger. It's moving to be invited inside of human struggles, but it's liberating to see grief tempered by kindness.

Examples abound of compassion, understanding, giving. It's like the Pokémon in the phone app—just look and you'll find the best of humanity, suddenly visible everywhere around you.

In Benton Harbor, I met Minnie Richmond, a paraeducator struggling to make ends meet on low wages—who cultivates caring relationships with fragile foster children, her “diamonds in the rough.” She understands their needs, having been in foster care as a child.

“When my home wasn't such a pleasant place to be at, I knew I could go to school and teachers and paraprofessionals would be there for me,” Richmond said. “It was a place where I could be safe. Now I help children like that. Some of them just need to be nurtured.”

Other member voices echoed from the internet, across survey data and social media. I empathized with respondents to our survey on M-Step and the future of state-mandated assessments. More than 1,100 MEA members provided feedback to State Supt. Brian Whiston through our online form.

Pages of comments revealed the depth

of frustration. The tests are developmentally inappropriate. Way too long. Ambiguous and unclear. Of little value to educators. Draining of time and equipment better spent on actual learning. And on and on.

Said one third-grade teacher forced to test students all day: “I've taught for 15 years, and this is the first time I cried on the way home after watching kids taxed beyond measure struggle all day long. I am entrusted with parents' prized possessions. Today I failed my students.”

It happened again. I experienced gratitude amid despair. I felt the pain of a crying teacher who thought she failed her students, but I saw her courage and love, and it sustained me.

It's a privilege to do this job, and a responsibility. So much ends up on the cutting room floor, but I want to do justice to people's stories. I hope they will sustain you, too. ■

Michigan Science Teacher Among Five Inducted in National Teachers Hall of Fame

A former Harper Woods Middle School Science teacher and MEA-Retired member added a distinguishing honor to a long list of awards and accolades this summer when she was inducted into the National Teachers Hall of Fame.

The 2007-08 Michigan Teacher of the Year, June Teisan now spends her days learning from National Atmospheric and Oceanic Administration scientists in Washington, D.C., formulating curriculum, presenting at national conferences, and advocating for a strong public education system.

Teisan used data in her classroom from the Great Lakes Observing System, and helped develop Michigan Sea Grant's Teaching Great Lakes Science lessons. Her interest in data led her to implement Basic Observation Buoy (BOB) projects on Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie, with her students involved in every step, from construction to data analysis.

The partnership with Sea Grant helped her leverage a \$20,000 grant to fund place-based learning—allowing her middle school students to sail on Lakes Huron, St. Clair and Erie, build and deploy buoys to gather water quality data, present at numerous conferences, and submit award-winning research to national and global science competitions. ■



Read more about June Teisan and her teaching journey at tinyurl.com/JuneTeisan.

UPCOMING EVENTS

August 18—BFCL Money Matters

MEA Headquarters, East Lansing

This Building Full Capacity Locals training is designed for local treasurers and presidents—new or experienced. The focus is on working together to successfully manage local associations' financial resources. Go to www.mea.org/bfcl for more information.

September 16-17—Statewide Presidents Summit

MEA Headquarters, East Lansing

New and experienced local presidents can kick off the school year with this opportunity to receive important updates from MEA officers and departments. The two-day seminar allows time for leaders to network and learn from each other. There are large group and breakout sessions that provide critical information. Go to www.mea.org/bfcl for more information.

October 5—MEA Fall Representative Assembly

Lansing Center

The Representative Assembly (RA) is the top governing body that conducts the business of MEA. The group meets twice a year, in the fall and spring. Delegates to the RA are elected by their local associations. Go to www.mea.org/governance for more information.

New Michigan Teacher of the Year Inspires

It should serve as comfort to beginning teachers everywhere that newly minted Michigan Teacher of the Year Tracy Horodyski of Kenowa Hills Public Schools in Grand Rapids barely survived her first year in the profession.

The MEA member struggled to feel competent and cried a lot, finally admitting to her physician uncle that she was “dying on the vine.” She would later realize that “this sort of suffering only comes from loving something so much,” but back then she needed wisdom from another professional who chose a career serving others.

He shared advice that he had received as a struggling new doctor: “Make it more about them and less about you.”

Those words became the cornerstone of her philosophy going forward and helped her seek inspiration, conversations, and truths that transformed her work. The biggest shift she has made in 16 years of teaching third and fourth graders involves listening to others.

“It’s about understanding and accepting that it’s OK if we don’t know everything, and to ask for help and to want to help each other, and then to empower students to do the same thing in the classroom,” she said.

Horodyski was honored in May as the Michigan Teacher of the Year for her literacy expertise and staff leadership, combined with an infectious excitement about learning and teaching. Read more about Horodyski’s philosophy of teaching at tinyurl.com/Horodyski. ■



Teachers: Check Accuracy of Your Evaluation Data Now in MOECS

Starting this month, K-12 teachers will need to check the accuracy of their evaluation data from the last five years that will be uploaded to the state’s online database known as the Michigan Online Educator Certification System (MOECS).

New state rules will tie teacher certificate renewal and progression to effectiveness labels teachers received during the most recent five-year period. The change is part of the new Michigan educator evaluation law, Public Act 173 of 2015.

The evaluation data will be available Aug. 19 to view in MOECS. If teachers find their evaluation data is inaccurate, they will need to work with their district to file a data appeal to correct it. Appeals to correct errors can be filed from Sept. 1-Dec. 1, 2016.

PA 173 maintained the requirement that annual year-end evaluations assign one of four effectiveness labels based on the tools and measurements used in your district’s educator evaluation system: highly effective, effective, minimally effective, or ineffective. In addition, the law creates new requirements for the renewal and progression of certain certificates based on the effectiveness labels.

In order to progress to or renew an Advanced Professional Certificate, beginning immediately, a teacher must have:

- Received a highly effective rating on three out of the five most recent annual year-end evaluations;
- Not been rated ineffective within the five most recent years; and

- Met additional criteria, such as the completion of National Board Certification or an approved teacher leader program.

In order to progress to the initial Professional Certificate on or after July 1, 2018, a teacher must have:

- Successfully completed three years of teaching;
- Received effective or highly effective ratings on his or her three most recent annual year-end evaluations; or
- Received three nonconsecutive effective or highly effective ratings and have received a recommendation for certificate progression from his or her current school administrator.

For additional information, visit www.michigan.gov/mde-edevals or email MDE-EdEvals@michigan.gov. ■

October 8—Commissions/Committees/Task Forces (CCTF)

MEA Headquarters, East Lansing

The MEA CCTFs are advisors to the MEA Board of Directors. Every year, these groups receive charges from the Board, which are the focus of their year’s work, and meet at least once a year to discuss their charges. Membership on a commission is by election at the RA or by appointment of the MEA vice president with consent from the

Board. If you’re interested in serving on a commission, committee or task force, contact MEA Vice President Nancy Strachan. Go to www.mea.org/commissions-committees-and-task-forces for a listing of CCTFs.

October 21—Higher Education Bargaining Conference

MEA Headquarters, East Lansing

The Conference features sessions designed specifically for higher education members. Sessions covering the trends in online learning, intellectual property, higher education funding, member engagement and bargaining will provide the information and strategies to help higher education leaders strengthen their local associations.

Community Art Changes Lives

By Heidi Posh, Art teacher
Livonia Public Schools

I will admit that occasionally (okay, maybe a little more often than that) I feel a bit overwhelmed by many of the challenges of doing my job as a high school art teacher. Even a seasoned veteran can be worn out by years of budget cuts, rising material costs, and the label of “non-core,” “elective,” “special,” or whatever term is currently used to mean less important than the traditional 3Rs.

That is why I feel so fortunate to work with someone like Kellie Stark. Kellie is a fellow Livonia Public School art teacher who faces many of the same challenges I do, but is somehow able to set aside the negativity and advocate for our students and our district art program. She strives to demonstrate to everyone in our schools and community the value and worth of the fine arts and of the educators and students who participate in them.

Two years ago Kellie started the Livonia Community Art program. This project displays professionally framed student artwork in local businesses. She got the idea for the project while walking around downtown Ann Arbor during the summer art fair. She was impressed by the multiple displays of student art work in shop windows and thought it was a wonderful opportunity for students to get recognition for their artistic skill in a non-school setting. Kellie is always looking for ways to validate the importance of children’s artwork. She liked the idea of connecting local businesses with the school community and started to think that a similar project might be beneficial to the students of Livonia.

Shortly after her trip to Ann Arbor, Kellie was cleaning the art room storage area at one of her schools and came across a large quantity of unused picture frames collecting dust. The two ideas melded together and the

time seemed right. She approached the district with the idea and was given the go-ahead.

With the district behind her, she got 10 local businesses excited to participate. She found the most effective way was to walk in with a framed piece of artwork and explain the idea in person. Now two years later, the majority of the original locations still host a revolving display of art, and this year she has added several new locations.

The response has been extremely positive from the businesses, school, children and their families. One of the business locations, George’s Livonia Gardens nursery, often asks for new work and even requests “themed” art around the holidays. Kellie uses this display opportunity as a contest for her students. They are so excited to display artwork, they come in during recess to work on the pieces, and she has had others take unfinished work home over school breaks so they can

Buchanan Elementary third grader Grace Trantham shows off her watercolor painting, which is on display at Merriboyl Lanes in Livonia. (Photos: Alexa Pierzynski)

Junior Abigail Melnychenko of Stevenson High School at the Looney Baker in Livonia.



K-12 schools eligible for two grants from Michigan Youth Arts

Two grants are available to help K-12 schools fund arts-related expenses, offered by Michigan Youth Arts with assistance from the Michigan Council for Arts & Cultural Affairs.

Equipment or classroom supplies could be purchased through one of the grants, which applies to fine or performing arts subjects—visual arts, instrumental

music, vocal music, theatre, dance, creative writing, media arts and more. The grant can also be used to repair existing equipment. These grant applications are due by November 1.

The second grant would pay for transporting students on an arts- or culture-related field trip. To apply for the grant, teachers have to choose from a list of

more than 200 pre-approved arts and cultural institutions that offer educational programming, exhibits or performances that enhance arts and humanities curriculum outside the classroom. The deadline for applying is October 19.

For more information or to apply for either grant, go to www.michiganyoutharts.org/grants. ■

have a chance to be in the contest.

Several other locations, including The Looney Baker and Merriboyl Lanes, have approached Kellie with customer offers to purchase the artwork.

A grandmother at one of the schools recently came to Kellie and thanked her for choosing her granddaughter's artwork. What Kellie did not know was that the girl had recently been in a foster care situation. The grandmother told her this recognition made the girl feel special and was a timely and much needed morale boost.

When I asked Kellie where she finds her motivation she said, "I am extremely passionate about teaching. I believe art education is a powerful tool

for engaging and motivating students to learn in all subject matters. Art brings happiness, fun and color to our schools. Art brings joy into learning. The more opportunities we can take to showcase these qualities and share with the community, the stronger program we will create for future generations of students."

Now I bet you want to work with her as well!

Current Livonia Community Art Locations and the schools being displayed:

George's Livonia Gardens
Coolidge Elementary

Merriboyl Lanes
Buchanan Elementary

Sam's Place Restaurant
Hoover/Cass Elementary

Leda's Coney Island
Roosevelt Elementary

Riverside Rollerskating Arena
Hayes Elementary

Looney Baker
Stevenson High School

Biggy Coffee
Garfield/Riley Elementary

7-Eleven (Newburgh Rd.)
Churchill High School and the Career Center High School

Eddie Edgar Ice Arena
Kennedy/Buchanan Elementary

Community Financial Credit Union
Webster Elementary ■

has a scratch board drawing of a peacock on display



Art teacher Kellie Stark, in her art room at Buchanan Elementary in Livonia, has inspired students and teachers alike with her community art program.



Algonac Teacher Helped in All-Too-Common Hardship

By Brenda Ortega, Editor, MEA Voice

In his baseball cap and Nike collared shirt—a lanyard for his keys hanging from the pocket of his sweatpants—Jeff Smith looks the part of a burly defensive coordinator for a varsity football team.

But the MEA member affectionately known as Coach Smitty in Algonac, where he teaches and coaches football and softball, reveals a softer side when he talks about players and students—particularly the kids he works with at the alternative high school.

“I really relate to kids who’ve had a hard time, that are from the school of hard knocks,” he said. “I pride myself on getting them on the right track. I love what I do; I love making an impact on kids and being a good role model.”

Then emotions come as he discusses his untenable financial situation after 16 years of guiding young people: “I’ve thought about doing something else. Sales—I can talk all day, so I could do that job. But it wouldn’t be what I love doing. It wouldn’t be as rewarding as what I do now.

“My reward is seeing kids do well,” Smith said, pausing to gather himself, “but I just want to be able to pay my bills.”

Though help is on the way for Smith, his financial struggles are all too common.

School Employees Squeezed

Smith is emblematic of educators across the state working hard, pouring energy, expertise, and love into their jobs, only to see their income shrinking year after year. Pay cuts and step freezes combined with rising costs of



Sixteen-year teaching veteran Jeff Smith of Algonac—AKA “Coach Smitty”—qualified for a Habitat for Humanity house. He will pay a low-interest mortgage amounting to no more than the rent he now spends on a cramped one-bedroom duplex for him and his sons.

living increasingly are squeezing school employees in Michigan.

The biggest hit he faced this summer—along with many school employees statewide—were rising health insurance premiums resulting from a Republican-backed law that limited the amount school districts could contribute toward employee health care.

Public Act 152, passed on a near party-line vote in 2011, forced employee contracts going forward to include either a fixed dollar amount a district would pay toward health insurance, known as a hard cap, or limit district contributions to a percentage amount up to 80 percent.

Since then, as health care costs have risen much faster than state-allowed adjustments, school employees have borne

a burden that gets bigger every year.

Algonac Community Schools employees are working under the hard cap, so this year Smith had to absorb a \$150 a month increase starting in July. He didn’t know where he would find that money. He and other teachers in his district have seen multiple pay cuts, one year as much as \$7,000 at his step level—a step level below his actual years of service because he moved districts four years ago.

“Every year, everything goes up except my wages,” he said.

Smith shares a small one-bedroom duplex with two sons who live with him every other week. His boys split the bedroom, while Smith sleeps in a dining room separated from the kitchen by a Pittsburgh Steelers curtain hung from a

shower rod. He doesn't have cable television. His parents pay for his cell phone.

Soon his seven- and nine-year-old sons want to start playing hockey. He'll have to buy equipment and pay team fees. "We'll have to make it work somehow, because they love it," he said.

It's not easy for him to talk about. "Pride" is a word that pops up frequently in conversations with Smith, and he's the kind of guy who prefers to play his role behind the scenes—or along the sidelines.

But now he's been thrust into the community spotlight.

Habitat Gives 'Hand Up'

This summer Smith learned he'd been chosen for a home build by Blue Water Habitat for Humanity, in partnership with MEA, the start of a one- to two-year process that will result in him owning a new three-bedroom house with a low-interest mortgage amounting to no more per month than the \$575 he pays now in rent.

"My boys can each have their own room, and I can have a room," he said. "It's been a godsend for me."

At first, Smith wasn't sure about applying. "I'm not big on handouts,"

he said. "I pride myself on working for what I've got."

He was convinced by his friend and mentor, varsity football Coach Scott "Barney" Barnhart, whose leadership on the gridiron last year thrilled the town with a first-ever conference championship for the Muskrats and a state playoff run to the regional finals.

Barnhart and a number of other local union leaders encouraged Smith to pursue the opportunity with Habitat when they saw what he was dealing with financially. No one is more deserving, Barnhart said.

MEA-Habitat Partnership Could Become a Model Nationwide

It all started with a couple of friends sitting on the porch and talking over a glass of wine. A what-if turned into a dream. Now the dream has come true, and the result could serve as a model for others across the country.

A unique partnership between MEA and Blue Water Habitat for Humanity grew out of the friendship between MEA UniServ Director Michele Israel and Habitat's Executive Director Ernest Werth-Toward. They first met when she was a fifth-grade teacher and he was a librarian at Garfield Elementary School in Port Huron.

Their vision: to encourage financially struggling school employees to apply for a Habitat home build and then rally the community of students, parents, and co-workers to support approved projects with fundraising and volunteer hours.

It's a logical match: "We knew in any school district there would be people working there who qualified, and that community would provide us a built-in volunteer base and a built-in way to do fundraising," Werth-Toward said.

"By nature, the union takes care of its own," Israel added.

The informal joining of union and non-profit forces saw its first success last fall when a new home was dedicated for preschool teacher Lea Chapa, following a tremendous outpouring of support from the Yale Education Association and others in that St. Clair County community.

From there, the Yale project drew the interest of EA leaders in nearby Algonac.

"There was a team of us, a whole group of teachers involved in our local here, who decided to go with this idea," said Algonac High School teacher and football coach Scott Barnhart. "Everyone jumped in right away."

They knew no school employee who applied would be guaranteed acceptance. Applicants must meet minimum and maximum income levels to ensure they have real need but also the means to pay a low-interest mortgage, taxes, and utilities in an energy-efficient home. Applications are reviewed with no names or labels attached to guarantee fairness, Werth-Toward said.

This summer, Habitat chose Algonac teacher and coach Jeff Smith to receive an affordable three-bedroom home, so he and his two sons can leave the crowded conditions of a one-bedroom duplex—all he could afford after 16 years as an educator in two Michigan school districts.

Smith began his 50 hours of sweat equity working in the Blue Water Habitat Restore this summer. Once the build begins, Smith will labor hundreds of hours on the house, in addition to tapping into a network of volunteers and fundraisers to raise, finish, and furnish the home.

Building and sustaining support for a project—and for future Habitat builds or renovations—is the challenging part. Partnering hasn't been without ups and downs, and initial efforts to launch an MEA-Habitat collaboration in 2011 fizzled despite some interest. But, "Now the energy is here," Werth-Toward said.

As word has gotten out, MEA staff and local leaders from other parts of the state are asking how to start something similar, Israel said. "It's not a piece of cake, but it's so exciting and so worth it."

The one- to two-year process of building a house for a member—from application to move-in—strengthens union bonds at the same time.

"By nature, the union takes care of its own."

"When I found out that Jeff qualified, I just broke down in tears," Israel said. "Most people don't live to see their dreams come true. Well, my dream was to have members of a local build a house for one of their own, and not only has it come true but now other units are saying, 'We want to be the next build.'"

Now that the idea has caught fire in the two counties served by Blue Water Habitat—St. Clair and Sanilac—Werth-Toward and Israel are taking their show on the road. The two are presenting their successful blueprint for partnership at MEA statewide conferences and at state and national gatherings of Habitat leaders.

"I imagine there will come a time when we're sitting in our rockers, having another glass of wine on the back porch, talking about this happening all over the country," Israel said. "We'll be saying 'Did you see they built another one in Oregon and another in California?'" ■



"Jeff is one of the most passionate coaches I've worked with in my 25 years of coaching," Barnhart said. "I haven't been around somebody who enjoys what they do like Coach Smitty does. He makes everyone laugh. He makes it fun."

Smith was persuaded to apply when he learned a Habitat home is not a giveaway. He'll have to pay the mortgage, along with putting in 50 hours of sweat equity working at the Blue Water Habitat ReStore, where donated items are sold. Once the build is under way, he'll log 300-400 hours at the work site.

It's a hand up, not a handout, said MEA UniServ Director Michele Israel, who helped to form the partnership between the union and Blue Water Habitat.

"The amazing part is that people think if you work in education, you have great benefits and make all kinds of money," Israel said. "When they find out a 16-year teacher qualifies for a Habitat home, it changes their perception of just what public educators make."

Already rallying around the project are local MEA members, businesses, and residents of Algonac, including Coach Smitty's students and players.

"I would be shocked if they don't jump in with both feet," Barnhart said of the students and staff of Algonac schools.

It's enough to make a rough-and-tumble coach go soft again. "It feels really good to know you're appreciated," Smith said. ■

This summer Smith performed "sweat equity" at the Blue Water Habitat ReStore, and he will log hundreds of hours helping with the build once it begins. He will be aided by volunteers from his local union and the community in a unique partnership between MEA and the Habitat chapter serving St. Clair and Sanilac counties.

A quick primer on coinsurance

MESSA is working to develop new health plan options to reduce how much members have to pay out of their paychecks for health insurance.

We are developing plans that include coinsurance, which is a percentage amount you pay for health care services after your deductible is met.

For example, if you have a MESSA Choices plan with a \$1,000 in-network family deductible, you would pay the first \$1,000 of the cost of health care services, as you do now. After that deductible is met, you would pay a fixed percentage (20

percent, for example) of the total cost of certain medical services, up to a fixed limit. As an example, if you had already met your deductible and had a \$1,200 bill for an in-network CT scan, you would pay \$240 and MESSA would pay the rest.

You would not pay coinsurance for services that already require a copayment, such as office or urgent care visits.

The amount you would have to pay out-of-pocket each year in coinsurance and copayments would be capped at your in-network medical out-of-pocket maximum, which

is your deductible plus \$2,000 (for single coverage) or \$4,000 (for two-person/family coverage).

If you're interested in learning more about coinsurance and other money-saving options from MESSA, call your MESSA field representative at 800.292.4910. ■





Pattern of NEGLECT

By Brenda Ortega, Editor, MEA Voice

This tale of two Michigan cities reveals a larger American story.

On one side of the St. Joseph River a small town sits along the southwest coast of Lake Michigan, a community of well-kept homes and luxury summer properties just an hour's drive from Chicago. Tourists come to walk the white-sand beaches, stroll the pier to a picturesque lighthouse, and visit the quaint brick-paved downtown bustling with outdoor cafes, boutiques, and galleries.

A quarter-mile across the bridge lies a slightly larger city dotted with sagging homes and abandoned buildings, silent reminders of better days—from a time before an exodus of well-paying manufacturing jobs eroded the economic foundation that once supported middle class families and a thriving shopping district. Now scattered redevelopment projects compete for the city's soul, along with the occasional restaurant or lawyer's office, amid boarded-up storefronts and weed-covered empty lots.

St. Joseph and Benton Harbor are called the Twin Cities for the river they share, but the waterway also serves as a dividing line that separates mirror images on either side.

One town's residents are mostly

white, the other black. One is well-off, the other poor. One boasts renovated schools stocked with state-of-the-art equipment, the other struggles to keep neighborhood schools open under the weight of state oversight and a multi-million-dollar deficit—with for-profit charter schools circling the campfire.

Flint and Detroit have captured the headlines, but they are not alone in facing problems that could be considered the social justice issue of our time: the abandonment of communities along racially and economically segregated lines.

Daunting challenges threaten the health and viability of urban public school systems across the state—jeopardizing our society's guarantee of equal education for all. Benton Harbor, Saginaw, Muskegon Heights, Pontiac, Highland Park, Inkster... The list goes on. Put them together, and a pattern is revealed:

Job losses ♦ Population decline ♦
Crushing poverty ♦ Struggling students ♦
Societal disinvestment ♦ Financial distress ♦
State takeover ♦ Closed public schools ♦
For-profit charters ♦ Still struggling students.

From there, the storylines diverge but with inequity-by-zip-code as a common theme.

Some public school districts—including Buena Vista (near Saginaw) and Inkster—have been dissolved under a 2013 law that gave state officials the authority to make that determination, forcing those students to be bused into neighboring school districts.

Others have labored under emergency management or consent agreements for years, including Detroit Public Schools, while Muskegon Heights emergency managers oversaw that community's complete conversion to a charter school district. A similar privatization model was tried in Highland Park but proved too costly at the secondary level, resulting in sudden closure of the high school and leaving parents with no choice but to send their older children elsewhere.

Meanwhile in Benton Harbor, teachers have been demoralized by years of state oversight, unstable central office leadership, constantly shifting curricula, crumbling buildings, voluntary pay cuts, mandated step freezes, and predatory charter schools.

But the stories in the following pages reveal how school employees there are fighting back and finding hope, with new leadership and some help from MEA. ♦

Nurturing Hope Over Despair

Dozens of frustrated school employees in Michigan's poorest city, Benton Harbor, watched as their colleagues asked tough questions of State Supt. Brian Whiston at a recent MEA-sponsored event. They listened to his patient answers with understandable skepticism.

Then a surprising thing happened.

The next day many of those same educators in this high-needs district—disillusioned by state labels of “deficit district” and “priority schools” following years of enrollment declines, painful cuts, and poor management—voluntarily returned to roll up their sleeves and work on solutions to problems they didn't create.

The brainchild of MEA UniServ Director Lou Ann Vidmar, the “New Beginnings” conference in late May—including a remarkably frank Friday night discussion with Whiston and an all-day Saturday workshop—represented a chance for demoralized school employees to build unity and empowerment in place of isolation and despair.

“I wanted them to finally have a voice,” Vidmar said.

Fifth-year elementary school teacher Jacqueline Wheeler said she showed up for the conference because she wants to support her Benton Harbor co-workers who remain dedicated in the face of tremendous difficulties. Her ultimate aim is to make things better for the students she loves, who deserve the opportunities that a good education can provide.

“I grew up in inner-city Chicago, and I know people from my school



State Supt. Brian Whiston told school employees in Benton Harbor—a state-labeled “deficit” district—“We need you.” The next day, many of them voluntarily returned to develop their own plan for school improvement at an MEA-sponsored New Beginnings conference. (Photos: John Madill)

who are doctors, lawyers, professional people, because something important happened for them in school,” Wheeler said. “I'm investing in my future.”

Investing in struggling schools has not been the state's approach, acknowledged Whiston, a former Dearborn superintendent who took over the state's top education post last summer. As superintendent, Whiston runs the Michigan Department of Education and chairs the elected State Board of Education, the Democrat-controlled panel that appointed him.

“We're working hard in Lansing to get the governor and legislators to

understand... We have to get rid of the blame game,” he told the crowd. “We have to say to a district that has challenges, ‘What can we do to support you?’ We need to invest in students from poverty; they need more resources and support.”

In recent years, Republican lawmakers controlling education policy have not offered concrete assistance to high-poverty districts such as Benton Harbor, beyond emergency loans and financial oversight to force debt reductions—which has not proved successful anywhere.

Since GOP lawmakers revamped the so-called emergency manager law previously rejected by voters (and made it immune to future voter challenges), no school district has emerged from direct control or consent agreement to become independent and financially healthy. Two such districts have been dissolved.

Another high-poverty district under state control, Highland Park, is on life support with 2,000 students bused to other communities, no high school, K-8 charters run by a low-performing

The ‘Twin Cities’ Side by Side

Select U.S. Census Data:	St. Joseph	Benton Harbor
Population total	8,286	9,976
Percent of persons age 25+ with Bachelor's degree or higher	41%	4.5%
Median household income (in 2014 dollars)	\$52,772	\$19,359
Percent of persons in poverty	8.4%	47.4%

Chair in a Troubled District



for-profit chain, and an expectation that only one school might remain by the fall. City leaders there openly wonder how they can revitalize the town with no schools to offer potential residents.

In fact, state oversight of schools has been so ineffective that a Macomb County judge in May issued a temporary restraining order briefly stopping the state from installing its latest iteration of an emergency manager—a CEO—to run four schools with low test scores in East Detroit Schools. The judge cited a potential for “irreparable harm” to the district if the state took over.

The state’s decision to go ahead and appoint a CEO despite community opposition flies in the face of the Eastpointe district’s recent elimination of its deficit and partnership with the Macomb Intermediate School District to improve academic gains. That community continues to fight the state takeover in court.

And it’s not hard to see why: the state’s self-touted plan to turn around 15 low-performing Detroit schools by placing them in a separate state-run district, the Educational Achievement Authority (EAA), was an unmitigated failure that is set to be eliminated.

Whenever the state announces plans to take over a district or school, either through the EAA or emergency management, steep enrollment drops follow—which accelerates financial hemorrhaging.

In Benton Harbor, the staff tried to avoid the state oversight trap by accepting a 10 percent pay cut in 2011, which only staved off a consent agreement with the state until 2014. Then a promised return of the 10 percent never happened, and several years of layoffs and step freezes continued instead.

The result? A teacher who started in the district 10 years ago still makes beginners’ pay of less than \$30,000 a year, and para-educators earn poverty wages. School employees buy many supplies, such as paper and pencils. Deteriorating building conditions include broken door locks, sagging window panes, leaking roofs, and mold. Arts programs have been slashed and buildings closed. And still this year 14 teachers and 22 support staff members were laid off to trim—though not eliminate—the district’s nearly \$15 million deficit after two years of state oversight.

Meanwhile, across the river in the tourist town of St. Joseph, the median annual income of \$52,779 dwarfs the

\$19,359 reported in U.S. Census data for Benton Harbor. There children learn in shiny new facilities with advanced technology and better-paid educators.

No one sees the contrasts more clearly than Benton Harbor EA President Deb Balbo, whose husband teaches in St. Joseph. “We have to do the best we can with what we’re given,” Balbo said. “We’re here for the students—there’s no other reason to be here.”

For what it was worth, Whiston offered his appreciation. “I know it’s difficult in these kinds of communities and districts where you could make 10 or 20,000 dollars more by going to a new district, and I can’t blame anyone who does that, but we need you to stay. We need you to work with the students. You’ve built those relationships with them; they know you care about them.”

Perhaps the teachers could move to St. Joseph, but the students could not—St. Joseph schools are full and turning away school of choice students.

Whiston’s understanding of the situation stands in sharp contrast to Republican lawmakers who push school choice and charters as the solution to struggling schools—akin to feeding a sick patient a starvation diet, according to a recent Michigan State University study.

Districts don’t spiral out of financial control because they’re poorly run, the MSU study found. The most important factors are outside of districts’ control: cuts in per-pupil funding, school choice, and charter schools—all state-level policy decisions.

Loss of enrollment from school choice and charters creates funding losses that can’t immediately be addressed, the study said. For example, if eight students leave, their funding goes with them—to the tune of about \$64,000—but that doesn’t mean a teacher can be cut. So districts can’t shrink fast enough to avoid deficits, nor can they invest in improvements to stem losses, which defeats the idea that competition is good for schools.



Benton Harbor teacher Deb Balbo never wanted the job of local union president—"I said 'no way, not going to happen'"—but when no one stepped up (and with a little arm-twisting from MEA UniServ Director Lou Ann Vidmar), Balbo reluctantly assumed the role last February.

First, however, the 25-year teaching veteran laid down some ground rules. "My children come first; I don't travel; and I don't do media interviews."

Longtime Teacher Re-energized by Leadership

Let's just say the demands of the role—in addition to her full-time teaching responsibilities—have pushed her outside of those comfort zones at times.

As BHEA president, she's become a conduit of staff anger, channeling their pent-up frustrations to a brand new superintendent trying to turn around the struggling district. Balbo has held the hands of frightened teachers laid off due to mandated budget cuts. The job means attending one contentious school board meeting after another, until "my family barely knows me anymore."

But perhaps the hardest task she's faced is asking beaten-down school employees in a state-labeled "deficit district" with state-targeted priority schools to join together and speak up about how to make things better.

Morale is "as low as it gets," the first-grade teacher said. "The biggest part of it is about being heard. People need to see something they've suggested for improvement actually happen."

That was the goal of a "New Beginnings" conference MEA organized this past spring, with sponsorship from the Michigan Department of Education and MESSA. But for Balbo it meant fighting against her own fears: "I hate conflict;

it's very difficult for me," she said.

She knew Vidmar—the UniServ director—planned to offer the staff a chance to symbolically "let go" of old complaints and grudges by literally setting fire to them—written on butcher paper—at the start of school this fall. However, before that could happen individuals needed a chance to explore problems—to vent and discuss. Deciding which complaints could be let go of and which needed recommendations for immediate action became the focal point of the conference.

"It's time to leave the past in the past and move forward together," Balbo said. "It's time for us to be respected and listened to, because you'd be amazed at the expertise of our people here."

The process has clearly re-energized Balbo, despite ups-and-downs, disappointments, and discomfort along the way. A few months ago, when the local had no leadership, a lack of communication between staff and administration led to widespread fear and isolation.

"It's been stressful, but I keep plugging away, and I keep smiling," Balbo said. "A lot of people have thanked me, so I feel like what I've done has been needed and appreciated. I think I've been a help, so I don't regret it at all." ■

"We need to have a policy conversation around this idea of putting two schools next to each other, then telling them to compete and not understanding how wasteful of tax dollars that is," Whiston told the Benton Harbor staff. "Look at buildings that you have and how they've been emptied by choice, and next door a new building has been built and more resources have been spent, and the children have just moved down the street."

Michigan opened the charter school floodgates in 2011 by allowing unlimited numbers of for-profit operators to locate without controls—drawing some of the worst-performing charters into the poorest cities. Whiston called it a "Wild West kind of system" where no one regulates whether public funds are used to duplicate efforts solely to create

a false "choice" for parents.

Four different for-profit charter operators have opened schools in Benton Harbor, but only one that has been around for 20 years has achieved higher student test scores than Benton Harbor Area Schools. The newcomers have posted worse academic outcomes, while draining resources away from the existing district and into the coffers of private corporations.

"There needs to be accountability for charters and for online schools, just like there's accountability for us in traditional public schools, so I am going through a process to develop that accountability," Whiston said. "I'm going to ask the legislature for some laws to change, because I don't have the authority to shut down a low-performing charter school at this point."

Educators at the conference said some of the charters offer parents a \$50 check for enrolling their children, but they send the most difficult-to-educate children back to neighborhood schools once the October student count day has passed. Whiston answered that funding changes are in the works to allow districts that receive students back from other schools to bill those districts or charter operators for the remaining per-pupil funding.

Still, many who've dedicated their lives to the Benton Harbor district worry about the future if officials fail to curb enrollment losses that have amounted to a 40 percent drop in 10 years.

Some pin their hopes for turnaround on a new superintendent who began last February. Dr. Shelly Mills-Walker is a veteran teacher, principal, and admin-

New Voice, New Hope

Benton Harbor school employees were given a tough mission at the MEA-sponsored New Beginnings conference this past spring. They were asked to agree on the top four most pressing issues that need addressing but won't cost money to fix.

Here's what they came up with:

- Stable curriculum with resources
- Code of discipline enforced from top to trenches
- Administrators showing respect for

employees

- Smaller, better-balanced class sizes

Not entirely free, but definitely common-sense improvements that new Supt. Dr. Shelly Mills-Walker said she will incorporate into district planning, because employees need to have a voice, she said.

"If they feel supported, if they know I believe in them, if they understand I want them to be the professionals and I respect them as

the professionals on the front lines, that's going to go a long way toward improving things," she said.

Other improvements in the works include a new K-2 dual language English-Spanish magnet school and working out a district discipline plan that eliminates out-of-school suspensions with an in-school resource room that identifies needs and services for troubled students, Walker said. ■

istrator from suburban St. Louis, Mo., who said she relocated because she felt called to work in an underserved area.

Mills-Walker has expressed a commitment to involving staff in problem-solving and decision-making.

"It's critical that they have a voice every day, all the time," she said, adding that she tries to follow the advice of an early career mentor who told her, "Listen with the intent to be influenced."

She's building a committee of teacher advisors to keep her in the loop and

share ideas.

Mary Sears has been teaching for 35 years in Benton Harbor, long enough to remember when the school district was considered "the place to be," back when manufacturing jobs were still plentiful. The high school was once so crowded officials had to break the school day into two shifts to accommodate all of the students.

Then she watched the community's slow decline, punctuated by two days of rioting in 2003 after the police-related

deaths of two black men. The riots briefly drew national media attention to the plight of Benton Harbor, but it didn't last and the city was left foundering. Fast forward to 2016, and conditions have not improved.

Sears wonders how society can turn its back on its neediest citizens. "Do we want to continue this cycle of poverty," she asked, "or do we want these kids to get out of poverty and be the generation that changes things?" ■

State Report Points to Need for Increased School Spending

Michigan needs to spend more money on education across the board and additional per-pupil funding for special needs students should be added on top of that, according to a long-awaited, state-commissioned report issued this summer.

The Michigan Education Finance Study found growing inequity between wealthier, high-performing districts with few at-risk students and poorer districts with more special education students, economically disadvantaged students, and English Language Learners. (ELL).

The study also found a "significant relationship" between student test scores and poverty, the percentage of special education students in a district, and spending per student. Legislative Democrats negotiated to have the study conducted by a Denver-based consulting company that specializes in analyzing education systems and policies.

The study recommends a base per-

pupil allocation of \$8,667 for students without special needs, along with increases of 30 and 40 percent above the base amount for economically disadvantaged students and ELL students respectively.

"The state should be concerned that many of the measures of equity and fiscal neutrality have trended up slightly in recent years, suggesting that the school finance system may be getting less equitable over time," the report concluded.

Next year the state will spend well short of the recommended amount—between \$7,511 and \$8,229 in per pupil foundation allowances. Other funding sources of school district budgets include local monies, such as property taxes, additional state revenues, and federal dollars.

MEA President Steven Cook said the results confirmed what many educators

knew: "In a word, Michigan's commitment to education funding is inadequate," he said. "It is not a coincidence that high academic performing districts are also the highest funded districts in Michigan."

The spending of "Notably Successful" districts was used to determine adequate spending levels. Those 58 districts had above-average standardized test scores and met at least one additional performance standard, such as reducing socioeconomic or racial achievement gaps.

The study notes that 89 percent of Michigan school districts are funded below the notably successful threshold.

"We demand excellence from our teachers and we demand high achievement from our students, yet we fail to adequately fund our public schools to give those teachers and students a fair chance to achieve those goals," Cook said. ■

DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE

PAGE 1

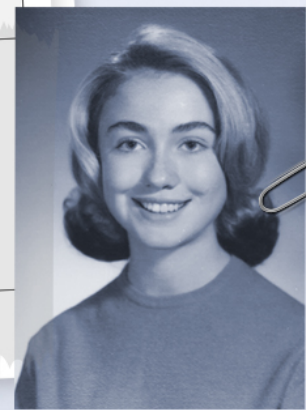
EDUCATION RECORD

CANDIDATE NAME: HILLARY CLINTON	ISSUED BY: NEA PAC	REPORTING PERIOD: ELECTION 2016
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SUBJECT:	CAUGHT ON RECORD:	TEACHER COMMENTS:
EDUCATION FUNDING	Believes in public education: "We've got to come together and fight together to give our schools and our teachers the resources they need - and we've got to convince the whole country to support public education." <i>NYSUT Speech, 4-8-16</i>	Let's get to work!
RESPECTING EDUCATORS	Pushes back on blaming & shaming: Clinton says we need to stop "blaming and scapegoating teachers" and put money into the schools that need it. <i>CNN, 3-6-16</i>	Finally! Someone who gets it!
ESPS & SPECIALIZED STAFF	Understands we all need support: "I will have your backs...everyone who helps our students succeed...school-related professionals, social workers, nurses and guidance counselors, speech therapists and many others." <i>NYSUT Speech, 4-8-16</i>	We <u>all</u> make a difference.
SEAT AT THE TABLE	Wants us at the table: "I will ensure that teachers always have a voice and seat at the table in making decisions that impact their work." <i>U.S. News & World Report, 10-3-15</i>	I'm ready to be heard. 
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION	Advocates for Early Head Start and preschool: "It's time we realize once and for all that investing in our children is one of the best investments our country can make." <i>LA Times, 6-15-15</i>	You got that right! 



The public school system has been ... second to the Constitution, the most important institution in making America the great country that we have been over the last 200-plus years.
~ Hillary Clinton



Clinton Vows 'I'm With You' in Rousing NEA Speech

More than 84 percent of delegates to the NEA's Representative Assembly voted to endorse Hillary Clinton for president in November's general election, following her rousing speech focused on education issues (available for viewing at StrongPublicSchools.org).

"I'm with you," she told the crowd of 7,000 active and retired teachers, education support professionals and higher education faculty and staff gathered in Washington, D.C. in July. "And if I'm fortunate enough to be elected president, educators will have a partner in the White House—and you'll always have a seat at the table."

She voiced her support for strong unions: "I want anyone who has faced a hostile state legislature, a union-busting governor, or both, to know that help is on the way. I'll fight back against the attacks, and stand up for your right to organize and bargain collectively."

And she vowed as president to lead a national campaign to modernize and elevate the profession, acknowledging that educators are asked to right the wrongs of poverty and racial inequalities with deep historical roots.

"We need to tackle all the problems holding our kids back—and we need to do it together, as one American community. Let's create more community schools—and more partnerships between schools, social services and non-profit organizations to offer a range of support and opportunities for kids."

She spoke about teachers' low pay and proposed forgiving college debt for teachers after 10 years. "We ask so much of you and we don't give you nearly enough in return," she said, going on to criticize the low pay of education support professionals.

"It's an outrage that so many of the food service staff, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, and education support professionals who keep our schools running and our children learning struggle



NEA President Lily Eskelsen García declares: "Now, more than ever, we must come together to ensure a great future for this country." (photo: Scott Iskowitz/NEA)

to provide for their own families."

Clinton labeled for-profit charter schools "unacceptable," and called for returning standardized tests to "their original purpose"—giving useful information to teachers and parents. Test-and-punish policies are "fundamentally wrong," she said, hurting low-income students the worst as schools narrow the curriculum and eliminate extra-curricular programs to focus on test scores.

"That is a form of inequality, and we are not going to stand for it!"

One week later, her Democratic primary rival, Bernie Sanders, officially offered his endorsement—pointing to priorities the two candidates share in common.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen García said the enthusiasm and perspective that Sanders and his supporters—especially younger voters—brought to the 2016 presidential primary could not be overstated.

"That work continues as he partners with Hillary Clinton to champion progressive plans to tackle the growing problem of college affordability, income and economic inequality, and to strengthen health care," Eskelsen

García said.

Now it's important for everyone interested in protecting public education to come together and commit to campaigning and voting for Clinton, Eskelsen García said. The alternative would be disastrous.

"We cannot afford to let Donald Trump get anywhere near the White House," she said. "His misguided and reckless vision would take the country in the wrong direction. He is too dangerous, ill-informed and temperamentally unfit to lead this country."

"Collectively, we know there is simply too much at stake in this election. Now, more than ever, we must come together to ensure a great future for this country." ■

WE NEED BOOTS ON THE GROUND

It's time to get involved! Volunteer to campaign for Hillary Clinton, and help her defeat Donald Trump in November—Check out how to join the effort at StrongPublicSchools.org, and click on "Join the campaign."

MESSA rolling out aggressive plan to save money for school employees



Ross Wilson,
MESSA Executive Director

MESSA leaders and staff understand school employees are struggling financially — and we are working hard to reduce health costs for MESSA members.

We know it's been a decade or more since school employees have had much of a raise or even a step increase. The Legislature has required you to pay up to 11 percent more into your retirement and shifted more health care costs to you.

Statewide, employees are bearing an increasing financial burden because the Legislature capped what school districts can spend on employee health care. The law, Public Act 152 of 2011, shifted significant costs onto your back. The law applies no matter which health insurer provides your coverage. The cap is low and doesn't keep up with rising health costs.

MESSA has been a leader in the education insurance market since 1965. Now, as you and your employer struggle with rising health care costs and state-imposed limits, MESSA is taking the lead to develop new op-

tions to help. We have an aggressive plan to reduce members' premiums that includes:

- Launching three new higher-deductible options for MESSA Choices plans. These became available July 1.
- Researching new coinsurance riders for MESSA Choices and MESSA ABC.
- Developing a new prescription drug plan to help rein in the costs of expensive specialty drugs.

Another effort to reduce your out-of-pocket costs is MESSA's new coverage of 24/7 online doctor visits through Amwell, which began July 1. A visit costs just \$49, which is significantly less than a doctor's office or urgent care visit. Your plan's deductible and office visit copayment will still apply.

We expect to have more products available as early as this fall and more in 2017.

MESSA is actively seeking solutions because we are a member-run nonprofit, we don't earn profits, don't pay commissions to insurance agents and we're governed by a board of school employees who are all MESSA members.

MESSA offers a wide variety of deductibles and other plan options to help reduce premiums. If you'd like to talk to someone about ways to reduce your health care costs, call your MESSA field representative at 800.292.4910. He or she can provide specific details for your group. ■

"Statewide, employees are bearing an increasing financial burden because the Legislature capped what school districts can spend on employee health care."





Testing and Accountability Changes Coming to Michigan

By Brenda Ortega, Editor, MEA Voice

Anyone who followed debate over the state's education budget last spring knows Michigan policymakers once again are toying with the idea of making wholesale changes in the standardized tests that schools are required to give.

House Republicans briefly removed funding for the two-year-old M-STEP in their proposed budget in April—just as testing season was getting under way across the state—launching a policy debate that included many MEA members offering feedback to State Supt. Brian Whiston.

By the time a budget was passed and signed by Gov. Rick Snyder in June, M-STEP money had returned for the 2016-17 school year.

In the meantime, however, more than 1,100 educators responded to an online

MEA survey about their experiences with the shortened version of M-STEP unveiled this spring, offering their ideas about how student learning should be measured in the future. The results were sent to Whiston.

One survey participant summed up the M-STEP sentiments of many: "The questions are much too hard. The test disrupts instructional time. All computers have to be used for testing and cannot be used for instructional purposes. The test is very stressful to students. The results take too long to get back and do not provide useful data."

Since then, Whiston offered a vision for a statewide K-12 assessment plan for 2018 and beyond. No formal proposal has been advanced, but his ideas include offering a mini-M-STEP in two

grades and replacing it elsewhere with shorter benchmark assessments taken two or three times a year to provide immediate feedback to teachers and show student growth.

All of the uncertainty in Michigan's testing system comes amid a backdrop of upheaval at the federal level. New education rules are being hammered out in Washington, D.C., as states—including Michigan—are developing plans to adjust to the shifting landscape.

The gargantuan new federal education law that passed last December to replace No Child Left Behind, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is undergoing a process known as rule-making in which the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) proposes the nuts and bolts details that fill in the new

law's broad strokes.

And while bipartisan cooperation in Congress shaped ESSA and shepherded the law to President Barack Obama for his signature last December, rule-making does not always foster agreement.

Case in point: testing and accountability.

Proposed rules issued by DOE this spring raised opposition from many NEA member teachers and even some members of Congress that ESSA's goal of returning flexibility and control to the states was being thwarted in favor of the same old federal test-and-punish mandates.

Specifically, the proposed rules would require states to assign every school a "summative" rating—such as an A-F label—where ESSA had no such mandate. In addition, a requirement that states identify and intervene in

schools with test scores in the bottom five percent has been criticized as more of the same. ESSA allows states to determine how to identify low-performing schools.

One of the architects of the plan, Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) offered a warning to U.S. Secretary of Education John King on the subject of accountability: "I am disappointed that the draft regulation seems to include provisions that the Congress considered—and expressly rejected. If the final regulation does not implement the law the way Congress wrote it, I will introduce a resolution under the Congressional Review Act to overturn it."

Another proposed regulation of concern to education advocates, including NEA members testifying before Congress this summer, involves a requirement for states to give test scores "much

greater" weight than other measures of school quality.

In the years-long process of lobbying for change, NEA members advocated for evaluating schools on multiple measures of quality—including things like a menu of engaging electives, Advanced Placement classes, strong parent and family engagement, full-time counselors, nurses and librarians, and early learning programs—and ESSA prescribes just such an approach.

Testifying before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce this summer, one Colorado teacher and NEA member told lawmakers the DOE's proposed regulations would make it harder for educators to do what's right by their students.

"I have been excited for the accountability system to not only focus on student outcomes but also on closing

Action Teams Bringing ESSA to Life

Action Teams are the "engine" of Michigan's ESSA plan development. These teams are tasked with moving from concepts and ideas to actual implementation plans. The following action teams began meeting this summer, charged with developing plans by the end of this year:

Accountability System—Technical

This team will work through the details of designing and building an A-F quadrant-based school grading system. This is a technically-focused team, dealing with the business rules and procedures needed to build an accountability system that can serve 3400 schools and 900 districts.

Additional Indicator of School Quality and Transparency Dashboard

One goal of the Michigan ESSA plan is to include other measures of school quality in accountability. This action team will identify additional indicators of school and district quality, and develop plans to include them in both the grading system and a quality dashboard for parents.

Assessment Implementation

This team will develop plans for implementing MDE's assessment vision. This includes developing the vision; developing roll out plans and timelines; and identifying implications for special populations of students.

Communication and Outreach

This team identifies and enacts a holistic communication and outreach strategy that helps communicate information to all stakeholders and garner feedback from those stakeholders.

Fiscal

This action team will identify all education funding streams and how the funds can be used in support of key activities, then look for areas where MDE may need to seek additional flexibility from the federal government in order to enact our key goals.

Innovative Assessment Pilot

Michigan will propose an innovative assessment to pilot in the elementary and middle grades. This innovative assessment will focus on team-based problem solving; critical thinking skills; and writing. This team will develop the plans and applications to have it approved as a pilot.

Supports

This action team will identify and develop a system of supports that takes into account many factors: high-needs districts and the partnership model, evidence-based practices, special populations of students, integration with early childhood education, wrap-around services, and technology.

Teacher and Leader Quality

This action team will work to integrate MDE's efforts around our educator pipeline into the ESSA plan, viewing educators as one of the key supports to drive improved student outcomes, especially in low-performing schools and districts.

Using Data to Inform Instruction and Leadership

This action team focuses on how Michigan's ESSA plan can include specific emphasis on formative assessment, data literacy, and using data in new ways to support educators and students. ■



Colorado math teacher and NEA member Cassie Harrelson spoke for educators across the country when she urged Congress and DOE to “get ESSA right.” (photo: Patrick G. Ryan/NEA)

the critical opportunity gaps that exist in so many of our schools,” math teacher Cassie Harrelson said. “Yet, once again in the proposed regulations we see a return to the focus on standardized tests. By diminishing the importance of some of the indicators, including the student or school supports indicator, we will return to a system where we are overly focused on the numbers game of tests instead of focusing on what students need to succeed.”

In addition, school leaders across the country are worried about rushed timelines identified by the DOE and Secretary King for implementation of ESSA. In the proposed regulations, schools would be required to collect performance data in the upcoming 2016-17 year for identification of schools needing “comprehensive support” for 2017-18.

However, Congressional leaders have indicated an interest in making 2016-17 a transition year, with 2017-18 as the first year of data collection and 2018-19 as the first year of intervention in underperforming schools.

With some flexibility to reduce the number of hours students spend testing and to improve the quality of tests students take, states are just beginning the work of rethinking policies. For example, ESSA allows some states to replace standardized bubble tests with an alternative assessment pilot.

Which brings this story back to Michigan.

As head of the Michigan Department of Education, Supt. Whiston has formed nine ESSA Action Teams to explore changes and improvements that are possible under the new federal law. The

teams have been charged with developing draft plans by the end of this year in areas that include assessments, funding, teacher and leader quality, and more (See sidebar, p. 20).

More input is sought from school employees as work continues on the action teams, made up of MDE staff, educators, school administrators, MEA members and staff, subject area experts, legislators, members of the State Board of Education, and others (See sidebar below).

Educators hungry for real education solutions need to seize this opportunity to have a voice in reshaping education policies in their states, said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García.

“We have to get this right,” Eskelsen García said. “We have to collaborate with key stakeholders to raise our voice to deliver on the promise of ESSA and to provide opportunity for all students.

“ESSA has the potential to be a game-changer, but only if it lives up to its original purpose—to ensure that all students succeed.” ■

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Educator 4 Educators. Clinical Psychologist serving Greater Lansing area. Former long-time educator. Understands school culture, educator stress and relationship problems. View profile at psychologytoday.com Nancy Bernthal PhD/LP. 517-285-4329, talk or text. ■

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is seeking teachers to aid in the development of the state's plan for the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) through participation on the MDE-ESSA Virtual Teacher Focus Group.

Educators are important stakeholders in this effort and MDE wants to hear from you as the work moves forward. To join the Virtual Focus Group, click the “Get Involved” button at www.michigan.gov/essa and select the “Virtual Teacher Focus Group” link.

At various times throughout the ESSA plan development process, group members will be asked to provide a teacher's perspective by sharing feedback and input on specific aspects of the proposed recommendations. Please visit the MDE-ESSA website for more information on the state's overall ESSA plan development efforts and sign up to receive regular updates through the general MDE-ESSA mailing list. ■



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