



GUEST OPINION

*The Gazette, Cedar Rapids
February 13, 2017
www.iowapolicyproject.org*

Collective bargaining offers accountability at every step

By Mike Owen

The Feb. 5 Gazette featured two columns about collective bargaining — one by a paid spokesperson for out-of-state corporate interests, and the other a well-reasoned, experience-based account by an actual Iowa teacher.

Allow me to add the voice of another Iowan, based on my experience as a 10-year school board member who has negotiated with teachers in a rural Iowa school district, and whose day job demands a commitment to real facts.

As a school board member, I can tell you negotiations with teachers can be one of the most rewarding parts of the job.

Bargaining sessions are one important way we learn from each other to assure smooth operation of our school district. This is a stated goal of Iowa's 43-year-old collective bargaining law — but bargaining offers more. I have found those discussions to be framed by our shared goals of educational achievement for our students. And I believe the bargaining relationship has enhanced our ability to pursue forward-thinking learning strategies in West Branch.

The prospect of arbitration — which is rarely needed — is a benefit to the process. It forces both sides to work toward an agreement, rather than to sit on an unrealistic position that likely will be rejected by the arbitrator.

There is accountability at every step of the way for both sides in the collective bargaining process, which has worked well in Iowa under Chapter 20, signed by Republican Governor Robert Ray in 1974.

The Iowa Policy Project has looked at wages and benefits of jobs in and out of the public sector. The result? An apples-to-apples comparison of workers at comparable skill and education levels shows public employees earn less than private-sector counterparts.

The real puzzler is the admiration that Drew Klein, of the Koch Brothers-backed group Americans for Prosperity, expressed for the economic and education disasters that have come to Wisconsin with Governor Scott Walker's gutting of bargaining rights. Since 2011, that state has dropped to 40th in job growth and 42nd in wage growth. Over 75 percent of Wisconsin schools report losing teachers more often, and rural districts face acute teacher shortages, especially in STEM areas.

Think about it. One in seven jobs in Iowa are in state and local government. Erode the quality of those jobs, and clearly you damage our economy — decreasing the income local residents have to spend, and increasing the problems with low wages, income inequality, and "brain drain" that already plague our state.

Finally, do you recall this issue during the campaign, when all candidates on both sides trumpeted their support for good jobs and for quality education? Chances are, no. Some tell you one thing in the campaign, and do something else when they have control of state government.

Recovery from the damage they could cause will take years — perhaps more than the years left in your children's and grandchildren's education.

Mike Owen is executive director of the Iowa Policy Project in Iowa City, and is serving his third term on the West Branch school board. Contact: mikeowen@iowapolicyproject.org.