



# Relationships, Dialogue, and Input

## School board members share how Act 10 has shaped relationships in their districts

It has been two years since Governor Scott Walker signed the Budget Repair Bill, known as Act 10, into law. The law effectively removed collective bargaining from salary negotiations. Districts adopted employee handbooks and restructured employee benefits with the goal of funneling more resources into the classroom. We asked school board presidents to provide their perspective on what Act 10 has meant for relationships in their districts.

### Keeping the Dialogue Open

CYNTHIA SCHMAHL — Kiel Area School District

**N**ot long ago, we anxiously anticipated every update regarding the pending changes due to Governor Walker's Budget Repair Bill known as Act 10. The anxiety of teachers, administrators, and board members ran high as many did not know the ramifications these changes would have on their positions, responsibilities and budgets. Though the changes promised more "tools" for districts to address budgetary concerns, many perceived these "tools" as threats to the security that collective bargaining provided.

Yes, Act 10 created more flexibility in many areas; however, conversations around the impact to collective bargaining certainly received the most attention. In retrospect, I cannot help but to recall a conversation I had with one of our veteran teachers, who retired last year.



One evening we both happened to be perusing materials at our local library when we began to talk about the impending ramifications of Act 10. She emphatically expressed deep concern for the whirlwind of

changes districts would make given their release from collective bargaining guidelines. As I listened carefully to her concerns, I encouraged her to consider our board's respectful actions throughout the Kiel Area School District's long history of negotiations with our support staff that had no official union affiliation.

We talked briefly, yet poignantly, about the fact that the Kiel Area School District always treated both teaching and support staff with the utmost respect, listening to their needs and desires with openness and a dedicated commitment to meet those needs and desires while balancing all the demands on our limited budget. I encouraged her to trust that the same respect would continue to permeate all of our efforts to work cooperatively as we seek to provide our best for our students.

Since then, we continue to work cooperatively with all our staff and particularly our teaching staff

through our teacher advisory council. This council regularly dialogues with administration over many topics including those that were formerly considered mandatory subjects of bargaining.

We regularly seek the input of our teacher advisory council on decisions that directly impact their effectiveness and efficiency in the classroom, including, but not limited to the calendar, snow days, staff development days, staff recognition, and morale.

This month, the teacher advisory committee and the school board scheduled a joint meeting specifically

to discuss the board's role in supporting staff, positively influencing morale and recognizing their classroom parent/community volunteers.

These cooperative efforts continue to support our mission to provide an opportunity for each student to receive a comprehensive, personal, future-focused education in a safe, supportive environment for the purpose of achieving excellence in their life-long pursuits through a partnership of family, school, and community. ■

*Schmahl is president of the Kiel Area School Board.*

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*Cynthia Schmahl,  
Kiel Area School District*

## ..... Promoting Supportive Relationships .....

CAROL CRAIG — Eau Claire Area School District

**A**s I began reflecting upon the impact of Act 10 in the Eau Claire Area School District, it became apparent that a lasting impact of ACT 10 was not primarily a fiscal matter, but rather a major shift in relationships among all stakeholders in the district.

Act 10 gave the Eau Claire Area School Board (and every other school board in the state) complete authority to change the foundations of employee contracts, thus relationships, and indirectly impacted parent and community relationships with public school employees.

Years of negotiated agreements that served to create respectful relationships and expectations were negated by Act 10 and replaced with employee handbooks — handbooks that leave sole authority to school boards to determine new compensation packages, work assignments, changes in hours, disciplinary considerations, promotions, health insurance, etc. Certainly this is a tremendous 'shift' in the working relationships among public school employees, citizens and the school board.

Research supports the crucial role of respectful relationships in public

schools on almost every documented educational measure: student achievement, graduation rates, staff retention and community support of referenda, etc. The plain truth is that student success is contingent on relationships: teachers' relationships with students, the community's relationships with public employees, internal relationships among employee groups and relationships among student-parent-teacher.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that Act 10 caused a signifi-

cant 'shift' in the working relationships among public school employees and school boards. The result of this shift was evidenced in Eau Claire as well as around the state — many school employees felt vulnerable, disrespected and frustrated.

After the passage of ACT 10, a major challenge for the Eau Claire Area School Board was to defuse, to the extent possible, the feelings of vulnerability, disrespect and frustration so that staff would continue to put the students first.





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The Eau Claire Area School Board chose to move slowly and cautiously with changes incorporated in the employee handbook in order to acknowledge the trust and communication forged with staff and community over many decades.

However, as a result of Act 10, that trust and mutual communication has become dependent solely on the majority of a school board — boards that change every year.

Statistics show that after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers have left the profession. Almost 40 percent of these departing teachers cite low salaries and lack of support as primary reasons for leaving. The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has seen a dra-

matic reduction in the number of students aspiring to be professional educators since Act 10, as have almost all teacher training programs in Wisconsin. The residual effects of ACT 10, feelings of vulnerability, disrespect and frustration certainly contribute to such a ‘brain drain’ in Wisconsin.

Perhaps one of the most crucial lessons of Act 10 was that school boards must ‘do their relationship homework’ — board members must investigate how public school cultures of professional respect and collaboration improve student achievement. Do your homework on the importance of promoting supportive relationships among parents and community members.

School board members need to reach out to their communities for financial and social support of public

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*Carol Craig,  
Eau Claire Area School District*

schools. We must invest in our children, the most precious and important natural resource, for a secure and productive future. That investment starts with strengthening relationships. ■

*Craig is president of the Eau Claire Area School Board.*

### Seeking Staff Input

TANYA GENDREAU — Gale-Etrick-Treampealeau School District

**L**ike all school districts, the Gale-Etrick-Treampealeau School District had to make many adjustments due to the passage of Act 10. However, it had almost no impact on the quality of education that we provide to the students of our district.

The largest issues Act 10 created for the board was how to maintain staff morale, implement a handbook, and make health insurance changes. These are still issues that continue to be worked on by the board, administration, and staff.

As far as working with staff, the board made sure to include staff input in decision-making. Just because things could no longer be negotiated, did not mean we should not solicit staff input on issues. The employee handbook was developed with input from three committees. These committees dealt with insurance, working conditions and alternative pay. The committees were

composed of board members, administrators, and certified and non-certified staff. The working conditions committee has been replaced by a general handbook committee. These committees continue to meet today as needed.

The general handbook committee meets several times a year to deal with different issues that arise. It’s impossible to predict every situation that can occur, so our handbook is an evolving document. This year, we have chosen to add a section to cover administrators. This committee provides a chance for the various groups to bring up issues that concern them. It’s the hope that the handbook committee can increase the dialogue among various stakeholders.

A concern of the board is how to retain quality staff with our limited budget and declining enrollment. We are currently trying to find a system to replace the step and lane. It’s

difficult for us to provide competitive salaries with some of the larger, wealthier districts nearby.

Staff moral continues to increase as time passes and the fears that Act 10 generated do not materialize. Act 10 did give us more control of insurance, working conditions and alternative pay. The board had a good relation with the staff before Act 10. There were years when we froze pay or step and lanes because of financial conditions.

We continue to spend resources on handbooks, Common Core curriculum, educator effectiveness, etc. The requirements of these laws and mandates seem to continually change, sometimes daily. They all continue to reduce the local control of a school board. ■

*Gendreau is president of the Gale-Etrick-Treampealeau School Board.*

