

## Kyle Olson of Education Action Group talks school finance

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Kyle Olson, of the Muskegon-based Education Action Group, an organization encouraging schools to cut waste, participated in a question and answer session on the matter of school finance. Following is the portion of the interview which did not appear in the pages of the April 22 Charlevoix Courier.

**Q: What kind of resolution do you hope to see in the contract issue?**

**A:** We hope the Charlevoix school board is allowed to cut costs in the most logical ways, like dumping expensive MESSA insurance, without interference from the teachers union. Remember, the district could save close to \$300,000 per year, more than what we were originally led to believe, just by switching insurance carriers. Those savings may turn out to be short-term, but so what? At the moment, short-term savings are better than no savings at all, particularly when you're talking about six figures. Unfortunately in many districts around the state, the MEA has done everything in its power to keep schools from dumping its pet insurance carrier. In some districts the union has even started recall campaigns against honest board members who question the value of MESSA.

**Q: What should the taxpayers know about teacher salary and compensation packages?**

**A:** According to just about every chart we've ever seen, Michigan public school teachers are among the top five in compensation in the nation. And the teachers do receive significant raises every year, despite their arguments to the contrary. Most districts, including Charlevoix, employ a 'step' compensation system for teachers, under which their salaries are incrementally increased about \$20,000 over their first 10-12 years of service. And higher salaries automatically click in as they continue their graduate work in college. As far as benefits go, roughly half the public school districts in the state carry MESSA insurance for teachers and other staff. It covers just about everything – therapeutic backrubs are on the list – so there's no doubt the teachers love it. But it's also very expensive, which is why so many districts are trying to break loose from MESSA. Through the competitive bidding process, other carriers are able to offer nearly the same benefits to employees that MESSA offers – perhaps without the free backrubs – at a much lower cost to the district. Who could object to that plan, particularly with school budgets in such trouble these days?

**Q: It is often stated that teachers are among the lowest paid professionals yet half of Charlevoix's teachers earn twice what the average worker in Charlevoix earns: Do you have any thoughts on this apparent disparity and the fact that those same teachers are asking for more during a time when so many of the people paying their salaries are hurting financially.**

**A:** In a published newspaper editorial, one Charlevoix teacher recently noted that she and her colleagues make less than people in the private sector who have the same level of education. She also stated that MESSA insurance is one of the few things keeping many teachers in the profession. We find that difficult to swallow. Everyone knows that working in the public sector generally pays less than working for private companies. Some people choose to do so, anyway, because they love what they're doing the public sector. Teaching is a very special profession, and teachers should be largely motivated by their love for their jobs and their students. If compensation was their primary motivation, they clearly chose the wrong profession. And they really don't have it so bad. While their jobs are certainly important and challenging, those at the top of the Bachelor's degree pay scale make more than \$50,000 per year in salary alone, and are required by contract to work only nine months per year. We fail to see how they can continue to demand general salary scale increases and expensive insurance at a time when many of their neighbors have lost their jobs and have no salaries or insurance to speak of.

**Q: Conversely: What's wrong with allowing the teachers to keep their MESSA insurance?**

**A:** Besides the financial reasons listed above, there is the obvious conflict-of-interest question. At the bargaining table, the MEA presses school boards to do business with an insurance carrier that the MEA basically owns and operates. Wouldn't that be a little bit like the superintendent pressing the board to hire his niece or nephew for a high-paying district job? Remember, MESSA's governing board is selected by the MEA, and MESSA transfers millions of dollars every year, in the form of various fees, to the MEA. It's amazing that the state has allowed this obvious conflict of interest to remain unchallenged for so long.

**Q: Please add anything you feel the reader should know.**

**A:** As we've frequently repeated in many districts around the state, these are extremely tough financial times for Michigan public schools. School boards are faced with the almost impossible task of cutting costs without gutting instructional and extra-curricular budgets. The teachers union should be a partner in the effort to control costs right now, instead of kicking and screaming to protect its financial interests. There will be an appropriate time for salary increases and benefit enhancements, when times are good and the coffers are full. Right now schools are just trying to survive. We fail to understand why the teachers union, in Charlevoix and elsewhere, is making it more difficult for them to do so.

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