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MEA: 'No story' in release of union e-mails by EAG

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A Muskegon-based education watchdog group is claiming a victory in defense of the state's Freedom of Information Act after securing copies of e-mails sent and received by the president of the Wayne-Westland Education Association, using a taxpayer-funded e-mail account.

The Michigan Education Association, the WWEA's parent group, however, contends that the Education Action Group Vice President Kyle Olson is just "trying to insert himself into a situation that, as a Muskegon resident, doesn't affect him."

It took two attempts under the Freedom of Information Act for Olson to obtain the e-mails from the Wayne-Westland Community Schools. The first attempt was blocked when the MEA obtained a temporary injunction until the merits of the request could be heard in court. Lacking funds, EAG dropped the request, but submitted a second one, addressing the objections the union attorneys had stated in court.

"Throughout contract negotiations with the school board, and during its illegal four-day strike last October, the teachers union maintained that it was battling over several fundamental issues, including staff health insurance coverage and class sizes," Olson said. "The e-mails strongly suggest that maintaining health coverage through MESSA, an expensive insurance carrier owned and operated by the MEA itself, was far-and-away the union's highest priority, just like it is in many other districts throughout the state currently dealing with labor unrest."

'TALKING POINT'

He added that the e-mails also suggested that class size ~~may have been little more than a talking point, or wedge issue,~~ to gain the sympathy of parents and get the school board to budge on health insurance.

"Throughout the e-mails to and from union President Nancy Strachan, the continuation of MESSA insurance coverage is a frequent theme," he said. "That should be of particular interest to taxpayers, because cash-strapped school boards throughout Michigan, including the Wayne-Westland board, have been looking for ways to dump MESSA and replace it with less expensive insurance coverage."

The MEA spokeswoman, Rosemary Carey, said "the e-mails simply reflect the president's daily e-mails to members regarding bargaining, insurance and class size."

"Kyle Olson insists that the issue of class size was not a real issue for the WWEA, but simply a ploy to get public support, yet, the bargaining note proves that class size was a major issue of discussion at every session," Carey said. "Olson keeps asking for information to prove his biased claims. However, all of the documentation is proving his claims to be nothing more than Olson's one-man show with a biased political agenda against

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MEA and MESSA.”

According to Olson, one e-mail, urging Wayne-Westland teachers to contribute to the MEA's political action committee, says potential donors should consider everything the union does for them, specifically noting salary, medical coverage, worker's compensation, length of the school year, and fighting privatization efforts.

“There was no mention of battling for smaller class sizes or improved student achievement,” he said, adding that class size is mentioned a few times in the e-mails, “but with less vigor or determination.”

‘LITTLE USE FOR TRUTH’

Carey countered that Olson isn't interested in the information that compares the cost of the district's health insurance plan with the savings MESSA would bring. He also has little interest in the amount of money the district has spent on items that do not improve education like new buildings and AstroTurf.

“But then that data would prove his claims to be false,” she said. “He has little use for the truth.”

EAG has posted most of the documents, minus duplications

and insignificant material, on its Web site at www.educationactiongroup.org “for the residents of the Wayne-Westland district, and other interested parties, to read.”

The EAG's release of the e-mails comes at a time when the school district and the WWEA have reached a proposed settlement agreement. Union members are expected to vote on it this week, with the school board to meet in special session next week. The two sides have not commented on the agreement because of a gag order issued by an administrative law judge at the start of expedited fact-finding.

Carey finds it ironic that Olson FOIA'd the Wayne-Westland president's e-mails in the spirit of full disclosure, but refuses to disclose where his funding comes from.

“EAG has no credibility,” she said. “It is a Republican front group. “There is no story here, he is just looking to have his name in the news. He didn't find what he was looking for so now he's trying to fabricate news about bargaining. He's on a one-man campaign against MESSA and MEA.”

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