



## Maintaining Unity & Membership in Hard Economic Times

The news of economic uncertainty is around us every day, and it's hard not to miss the clamor for working people to "do their part" to help the economy. No doubt you've been asked, as educators, to do your part. You are doing your part – you work hard, performing an important function in today's society, and the demands on you are not diminishing. We've put together some thoughts you can use to counter demands for you to reopen contracts, to accept pay freezes or cuts or take fewer benefits, and to address fellow members who are thinking of dropping their membership to save money. We've also included suggestions for what you CAN do for your community and students. *Remember:* don't allow emotions to pull you into the invitation to join the race to the bottom. If you do that, nobody wins: not your neighbors, your students, your school or you.

### General Comments...

- You live in the same economy as the rest of the community. Your costs have risen with inflation along with every other family, household, taxpayer and business person. You have the same right to earn a living to pay your bills as does everyone else.
- It is unfair to attempt to balance a school budget on the backs of (insert #) educators. Employees should not have to pay to go to work.
- Businesses lay off employees because there is no work, there is no demand for their product. This is not true in education. There are always students, there is an ever increasing amount of work and growing demand for "educational product." There should correspondingly be no reduction in educational salaries or benefits.
- VOTERS own the budget, not boards and not local Associations. Your obligation is to negotiate the best contract possible for your members. Allow the voters to fulfill their obligation of deciding how much of their school system they'd like to fund.

### On dropping membership....

Maintaining your membership is important even during challenging economic times because:

- Lower membership weakens your Association's position at the bargaining table, therefore lessening your ability to maintain and increase wages and benefits.
- Utilizing just a few member benefits can often cover the cost of your dues by using different programs that are discounted just for NEA members. If you haven't explored the diverse number of discounts and benefits offered at lower costs to NEA members, you should check them out.
- It is an investment in your profession. Your Association is your professional organization, offering professional development and assistance in navigating the world of licensing and other guidelines governing the education world.
- Your Association continues to advocate and monitor important state and national issues facing public education, students, and, most importantly, you as educators. Without a unified organization with strong membership, our ability to shape issues such as retirement benefits and professional regulator issues will be hampered.
- Not renewing your membership removes your voice from the Association and decision making for your union which is significant when tough decisions need to be made at the bargaining table.

### On reopening your contracts...

- Our contracts are negotiated on a regular basis every few years. They, by necessity, already factor in economic conditions, and are meant to give educators, administrators and the community a stable, multi-year platform from which to make education decisions.
- Reopening a contract now will only lead to a diminishing of educators' pay, benefits and working conditions. No one ever seeks to reopen contracts to give educators' more pay when the economy is humming along.

- Any concessions you make now WILL NEVER BE MADE UP, regardless of protestations from management to the contrary.
- With budgets overwhelmingly passed, at historically low growth rates, THE MONEY TO HONOR THE CONTRACT is already in place. Voters spoke, and said that the educators who teach our children are appropriately compensated.

### **On voluntary pay cuts...**

- While it is politically popular for highly paid ELECTED officials to take five- or 10-percent pay cuts, it is a gimmick that neither saves money for the state or local government nor results in any reduction of property- or other – taxes. Indeed, in some cases – particularly with our ESPs – such a decrease in pay could actually trigger higher government costs, in the form of public assistance for food, health care, etc.
- Most educators in Vermont, over the last decade, have barely kept pace with inflation. Their salaries, in real dollars, have not increased in the last decade. Taking a pay cut now to symbolically “do something to help” will not really help. For every percentage point decrease in pay, your district will see savings that, in most cases, will amount to less than \$10 per household per year – at the same time putting you further behind.
- Taking a pay cut will NOT HELP YOU BROTHERS AND SISTERS in any profession who have been laid off. No amount of symbolism will get them their jobs back, reduce their tax bill, or help them put food on the table. In fact, unlike in industry or retail, your jobs DO NOT GO AWAY in an economic downturn, and, likewise, a pay cut on your part will not make a difference in market forces causing layoffs elsewhere.
- Contrary to popular belief, MORE THAN 300 educators in Vermont will lose their jobs as of June 30. Our profession is taking a huge hit, and we recognize that many of these layoffs are unavoidable. However, they would not be prevented by school employees’ taking pay cuts – in several districts, management has made that clear to us.
- Freezing salaries and decreasing benefits are only *symbolic*; they are not substantial, and they *do not change anything* in the larger picture.
- A \$1,000 loss of salary this year, compounded over the remaining years of a member’s career, can be an astronomical amount of money.
- Any roll-over or freeze in YOUR contract will only encourage other boards to exert the same pressures of guilt on other locals. It will also encourage private sector employers to cite the actions of the largest union in the state as sanctioning their own roll backs.
- Before you freeze or roll-over your salaries, compute how much that savings would be. Then, divide that amount by the number of taxpayers or households in your community. The savings to these individuals is *negligible*. Now you have not only hurt your members, you have not helped the community, either.

### **What you CAN do:**

- Now’s the time to make that significant donation to a local food shelf, homeless shelter, after-school teen drop-in center or other organizations who directly help those who need it.
- Pay attention to students in your classroom who may need extra help if their families are suffering from a layoff or reduction in hours: steer them to the appropriate people and agencies in a kind and compassionate manner.
- Get politically active to make a difference. Remember that the health insurance you have is one of the cornerstones of a decent, middle class lifestyle, and the lack of health care is one of the most common causes of personal bankruptcy. Tell your elected leaders that you and Vermont-NEA support Catamount Health and the universal access to health care.
- Spend your money locally. Help out your community’s businesses, because they, in turn, help pay the salaries and benefits of your neighbors.