

LovelandPolitics Guest Commentary

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I wish to comment about the Thompson School District Re2 changes in the board from a union friendly board to a more conservative board that holds itself accountable for student achievement differently than previous boards. My name is Dr. Neil Schaal of Berthoud and I was a candidate for the superintendent when Dr. Stan Sheer was selected unanimously by the board of education to be the new superintendent. Dr. Sheer has been very responsive to the board and has carried out their policies well and I commend him on doing so. But a change is in the wind with the new board and I think the community going to hold the district accountable for student achievement in a different way than previous board policy had held.

During the process of the superintendent interview I got to see how the district works by studying the interactions between the different parties of the district and how the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Thompson Education Association (TEA) and the Thompson School District R2-j Board of Education directs the way the board interacts with teachers. Please note that this MOU applies only to certified staff, teachers and other positions requiring a Colorado license, and not to maintenance, drivers, front office staff, and aids among others.



When I interviewed for the superintendent position, I studied the MOU for some time as well as talked to community members about the 98 page document. During my study of the MOU, I looked for key words in the document. Accountability, achievement, evaluation, expectation, president of the TEA, salary, grievance, leaves, and benefits.

I found that the MOU is heavily weighted on the side of “How can the union make it easy for teachers in the classroom and keep members paying their dues to maintain the union.” I found that there is very little in the area of what is the union going to do for my (from parent point of view) student(s) to help them learn. Here are the results in how many times these words are in the MOU.

- Achievement, 3 times.
- Accountability, not even once.
- Student, 79 times.

Most student references are about number of student contact days, classroom size and how long the teacher is required to be in the building after their students leave for the day. There are only 4 or 5

references to students in regards to achievement and even less on how the teacher will be held accountable in the MOU for student achievement.

Evaluation, 50 times, but only 2 that relate to student achievement.

Expectation, 5 times, only 1 relates to student achievement.

Pay, 102 times, none relate to student performance and the district is required to deduct the dues from the member's paycheck to remit to back the union.

- Grievance, 34 times.
- Leaves (sick leave and vacation), 251 times.
- Salary, 103 times.
- Benefits, 48 times.
- Union President or Vice President, 24 times.

Here are a couple requirements from the MOU in regards to the union president. Did you know "The president of the Association shall be Granted full-time release with full pay and benefits during the term of his/her office and will receive full experience credit and advancement to the appropriate step of the salary schedule annually." This means that the union president does not teach in the classroom but draws their full pay and benefits during the time they are the union president.

Also, the school district is obligated by the following, "The cost of the salary for the TEA President shall be shared by the Thompson School District and the TEA. TEA will pay half of the Step 5, Column 5 of Salary Schedule B (195 days). All benefits and any additional salary will be paid by the Thompson School District." Generally, most TEA Presidents are senior teachers well beyond the step 5 or 5th year teacher salary and the district pays the difference. Should not the TEA be obligated to pay the entire benefits package from their own revenues if the TEA President is not obligated to teach fulltime or even half time in the classroom? Needless to say, I didn't make many TEA friends during my interview for superintendent when my responses to the TEA president and other TEA representatives were not as favorable to their union members as they wanted.

As a candidate for superintendent, I made a concerted effort to understand the MOU and the relationships between the board, superintendent, union, staff, students, parents, community members, and business members, and I found that there is a disconnect between what the expectations of the community are and how the union and the MOU have developed over several years. The school district probably needs to continue with the same attorney that the district has used for the past several years but the district must move on and place the student on top of the priority list. The outdated MOU does little to influence student achievement while also instilling community values in our students. A new board attorney is what is needed to critically look at the MOU and other current board policies. The new attorney needs to provide guidance to the board and the board must put their emphases on student achievement and to rewrite the MOU to meet the needs of the information age and, and not the industrial age which is the last time that this MOU may have made any sense.