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THE PTA AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

By Jean Mostrom

Mrs. Mostrom of Arlington, Va., and formerly of Australia, is a member of the Arlington County Schools' Management Bargaining Team Committee and is active in PTA. Her remarks here are from a panel discussion at NSVP's Seventh Annual Conference in February 1978.

I grew up under an autocratic school system where the State Department of Education controlled the schools throughout the whole state (one of them one-third the size of the USA in area), where parents were received politely by the principal, stated their case, and left. Education was solely the responsibility of the professionals, and volunteers never assisted in the schools. (Educationally, it was a fine system.)

Our six children have gone to school on the other side of the world, in the USA, and I have grown to look for and appreciate the friendly openness of the schools, the cooperation that can exist between principal and parent, parent and teacher, and the tremendous help volunteers can be in the schools and on school board advisory committees, the support the community gives, and the pride felt in the local school system. They are truly "our schools." There is a cooperation and interaction here between administrators, teachers, parents and the community which is unknown, I suspect, in most educational systems throughout the world.

Our concern in maintaining this cooperation and support makes the way teachers organize of great public importance. In November 1976, the National PTA launched a project of nationwide impact dealing with collective bargaining and its effect on education -- a major concern of parents across the country. States vary widely in their laws, or lack of laws, relating to collective bargaining in the public sector. School board members, administrators and teachers are given information on their role in the bargaining process, but the public has received very little information on how the process works or what role the public plays in it.

Recently the National PTA received funds from the U. S. Office of Education to begin a project to increase public awareness of collective bargaining in education. As a result, a panel of eight PTA people met last November with representatives of a number of educational organizations -- the National Education Association, the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National School Boards' Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the American Federation of Teachers -- as well as with other experts in the field of collective bargaining.

laws and recommended "every effort" to avoid strikes, but did not condemn their use. In 1978, the NEA recognizes the right of teachers and public employees to strike for better salaries, working conditions and fringe benefits.

As a parent-volunteer, I would prefer the conference table to the bargaining table as the place for educational policy to be determined. I prefer that it be achieved by dialogue and not as the result of demands. The basic dedication of *all* to the welfare of students should be at the root of the formulation of policy, made and carried out by the school board, administrators, teachers, and the PTA, whose reason for being is to promote the welfare of children and youth. In professional negotiations, the bargaining is carried on behind closed doors, the public is excluded; faced with a fait accompli, parents feel that they have had no say in decisions that directly affect their children.

The Arlington County School Board, recognizing this and wishing to gain more citizen assistance in its negotiations with employee groups, appointed four public representatives with expertise in certain areas to existing committees established by the superintendent in preparation for upcoming negotiations with teachers and school administrators. The committees were: Finance, Fringe Benefits, General Conditions and Facilities, and Professional Issues. They reviewed the current collective bargaining agreements, including salaries, and gave advice to the superintendent and the board. In addition, all Arlington residents were given an opportunity to express their concerns and suggestions to the school board at a public hearing. Subsequently, community suggestions could be addressed to the chairman of the appropriate committee.

The Arlington School Board felt very strongly that broader public participation in the negotiations process would inform the community of the complex educational issues which must be faced. Equally important, such involvement would enrich the advice given the school board to help in making judgments. Thus I became a member of the Arlington County Schools' Management Bargaining Team Committee as a staff representative on the Professional Issues Committee. We had just finished our study and made recommendations when Governor Godwin outlawed collective bargaining in Virginia for public employees.

It is extremely important that parents and teachers work cooperatively in the education of the children. Support of the schools by the taxpayer is vital to a quality education. I trust that the spectre or the reality of collective bargaining will never prevent parents, teachers, administrators and school boards from continuing to be "partners in education."

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