

Michigan teachers elect new union chief

By Carol Axelson
staff writer

Larry Chunovich, newly elected president of the 15,000-member Michigan Education Association (MEA), said his top priority will be to lobby the state legislature for more state aid to education.

"The present method of funding public schools is inadequate," said Chunovich, a Southfield-Lathrup High School mathematics teacher for the past 15 years.

"Wealthy districts can afford to have specialized programs, while poorer districts that suffer severe cutbacks can't afford them."

Although he doesn't propose any sweeping changes in the present state aid formula, Chunovich hopes to promote "establishing stability and equity" in funding.

Chunovich, who outpolled current MEA vice president Edith Swanson, 308 to 243, won the presidency during the statewide organization's convention last week in Detroit.

He succeeds Keith Geiger, who resigned as president after six years to run for vice president of the National Education Association, which will hold its election in Philadelphia in July.

THE WEST BLOOMFIELD resident will serve a two-year term beginning in September. He will be paid "between \$45,000-\$50,000 a year."

Chunovich, who spent a year campaigning for the job, considers his new role as "maintaining and promoting MEA goals and objectives."

Addressing the problem of declining state aid to public schools ranks high among MEA's objectives, he said.

A coalition of 18 statewide groups, including the MEA, was formed more than a year ago to sponsor letter-writing campaigns and lobby the legislature. Their goal is to "convince the governor and the legislature to make funding for public education the state's top priority."

Gov. James Blanchard has already proposed a \$207.4 million increase in state spending for primary and secondary education in his new spending plan, but Chunovich and other MEA members say that proposal is far from being a "panacea."

"We're extremely pleased with the governor's proposal," said Chunovich. It will give some poorer districts the opportunity to reinstate programs.

"However, that's not a long-range solution."

SPOKESMEN FROM THE MEA and other education associations have contended that school districts across the state have faced severe cutbacks in programs as a result of declining state aid.

"Five or six years ago, the state's share was over 50 percent," said Katie Keala, a spokeswoman for the MEA. "Now property taxes account for 60 percent of local school budgets. The

federal government's share is about 5 percent and the remainder comes from the state."

She said the newly formed coalition called Equal Partners for Education in Michigan — hopes to push the legislature to live up to the commitment it made when the state aid formula was adopted in 1973.

THE SCHOOL AID PLAN guarantees each of the state's 570 districts a flat \$365 per pupil, plus \$50.55 for each mill of taxation approved by local voters. (One mill equals \$1 for each \$1,000 of equalized property valuation, usually half the market value of a home.)

If one mill in a district doesn't come up to \$50.55 per pupil, the difference is made up by the state. In Southfield, where property values are high, one mill of tax raises \$106 per pupil. Southfield is one of some 100 districts classified as "out of formula" because it gets little or no state aid.

However, in Romulus — which has a smaller tax base — one mill raises about \$39 per pupil. Poorer districts such as Romulus have claimed that ris-

ing property values, coupled with cuts in state aid, have made the rich richer and the poor poorer.

"I don't know how we can, but we must work to provide equity in funding from one district to another," Chunovich said.

Another goal Chunovich hopes to accomplish is lobbying for changes in state laws governing collective bargaining for teachers.

"The law allows us to negotiate and bargain collectively. However, it doesn't address specific alternatives available when the parties reach an impasse."

Currently, there are more than 100 local districts in Michigan (none in Oakland County) whose teachers are working without a contract," Chunovich said.

Teachers in many districts went on strike this year. The friction that's created during a strike continues to escalate and it gets even harder and harder to pull things together."

TO REMEDY THE situation, the MEA has proposed several alternatives, including forcing the two sides to

go to binding arbitration. Both sides would have to abide by the arbitrator's ruling on salary increases.

The system would be similar to one used by local police and fire officials.

Chunovich acknowledges that local school boards have been opposed to the idea in the past.

However, he said, "everybody agrees that something has to be done to prevent strikes."

"Hopefully, we'll be more successful in resolving the issue now that we're dealing with a new governor and a new legislature."

Chunovich has been a teacher in the Southfield school district for 17 years. His first two years were at Southfield High School and the remaining 15 at Southfield-Lathrup High.

He has been vice chairman of the board of directors for Delta Dental Plan of Michigan for the past six years. The former treasurer of the South Oakland MEA for four years, he also served as president of the Southfield Education Association and as a member of the MEA board of directors.

He is married and has two daughters.



Larry Chunovich
new MEA president

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