

'Teachers deserve better pay'

By Kathy Parrieh
staff writer

Don Cameron took a pay cut when he left an airline ticket counter job to teach at Derby Junior High in Birmingham.

It was worth it because he always enjoyed education and wanted to be a teacher. There was no doubt about it.

As the new head of the National Education Association (NEA), Cameron is determined to see that teaching isn't a step backward for other college grads.

"Visit public schools anywhere in this country and you'll discover that across the nation teachers are doing a very fine job," said the NEA executive director, whose union members average \$12,700 when they start their careers.

"SOME DON'T measure up, but the vast majority do. The public has a better educational system than it has a right to expect because of the low pay."

The Detroit native has always had great respect for education — and the people who staff classrooms.

"I was always fortunate to have good teachers," said Cameron, a graduate of Boyville High School who attended the Knights of Columbus boarding school after his mother died and father left home. "I was probably one of the few people in the world who hated to graduate from high school."

Working full time at Willow Run Airport to get through Eastern Michigan University, Cameron received his bachelor of science degree in education in 1981 and master's in school administration in 1982.

Then he chose a district to teach in — an opportunity most of his 1.7 million members would never get today.

"IN THOSE days if you had a degree and approved academic credits, you could go almost anywhere. But I was only interested in one school district," said Cameron, who chose Birmingham

because of its reputation as a city where education is valued.

He was barely on the job when someone asked him to serve on a union committee. "They promised I wouldn't have to do much," recalled the NEA leader, who became building representative and then "right off the bat" president-elect of the Birmingham Education Association (BEA).

His 1985-86 presidency fell during the first year of collective bargaining in Michigan. It was quite an experience for the young teacher, who went into the job expecting to be a "traditional president."

"Before that we had a salary committee, made an elaborate proposal and the board of education listened patiently and decided whether to give us \$50 or \$100 more a year," said Cameron.

"BUT COLLECTIVE bargaining was a whole new ballgame. We were able that first year to bring in \$1,100-\$1,200 more per teacher."

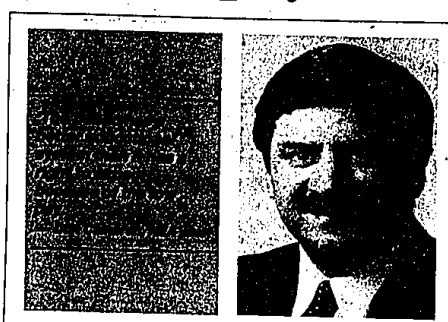
Because of his success at the bargaining table, Cameron was hired as the BEA's first full-time director in fall 1986. Then an American history teacher at Seaholm High School, he left teaching to devote himself to union activities.

It was a decision which led him into union work first at the state and now the national levels.

In 1969, Cameron's negotiating committee split on whether to push for more money in a contract. Believing further gains would mean teacher cutbacks, the executive director presented a tentative agreement which was narrowly voted down by the district teachers.

"He was correct in his supposition that positions would be cut. They did do that later," said Groves High School teacher John T. Sala, who was BEA president at the time.

"But Don felt that having taken such a strong advocacy position, it would be



better for the union if he pulled out."

Sala, who calls Cameron "one of the leaders in this area of collective bargaining," took over BEA negotiations during the following fact finding. But Cameron was behind the scenes until the process ended.

MEANWHILE, Cameron accepted an offer from the Michigan Education Association (MEA) to work as a public relations consultant. That led in 1975 to a job as MEA director of communications.

In 1978, Cameron became state executive director for an NEA affiliate, the Florida Teaching Profession.

He was named NEA assistant executive director in 1979 and became its head June 1 after Terry Herndon resigned.

As chief administrator, Cameron, now a Washington, D.C., resident, supervises a staff of 550 and manages an annual budget of more than \$83 million.

IN HIS 20 YEARS with the labor organization, Cameron has spoken out on many controversial issues in education.

NEA's educational objectives have been: expanded federal aid to education, education of handicapped children, establishment of a cabinet-level Department of Education, higher standards for the teaching profession and prevention of tuition tax credit legislation.

Dedicated to educational excellence, Cameron is pushing for tougher curriculum and graduation requirements, higher standards for entering the teaching profession and for teacher certification. He's also committed to the elimination of sex and racial discrimination.

"I'd like to see the reforms public schools have been talking about for years," said the father of two.

"I'm looking forward to NEA being part of the solution instead of part of the problem," he said.

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