

Former area teacher eyes top union post



Keith Geiger

By Kevin Brown
staff writer

Former Livonia math teacher Keith Geiger is hoping to be elected president of the country's largest labor union.

And local friends and acquaintances say he deserves it. Geiger, 47, left Livonia for Lansing in 1977 after he was elected president of the Michigan Education Association.

Then in 1983, he was elected vice president of the National Education Association, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

RE-ELECTED TO that post in '85 and '87, Geiger now seeks election in July to the post of president of the 1.9-million-member union.

As NEA vice president, Geiger occasionally testifies before Congress to urge passage of legislation, oversees a Washington office staff of 350 and speaks to numerous groups around the country.

But does he miss Livonia? "First of all, I miss teaching," said Geiger from his Washington office. "I miss officiating basketball. I did that for 17 years. I miss the camaraderie of the teachers." Geiger said, adding he also misses working with teachers and administrators.

Geiger said that while he observes many school systems around the country in his travels, none surpass the Livonia schools in quality of personnel.

His former friends and colleagues remember Geiger as a good teacher,

well-organized, conscientious, dependable, and an effective, charismatic leader.

"He's getting just what he deserves," observed a former colleague.

YET, THERE'S one thing about Michigan that Geiger is glad he left behind. "I don't miss the cold and snowy winters."

A native of Pigeon in the Michigan thumb, Geiger began his teaching career in 1962 at Bryant Junior High. He moved on to Livonia Stevenson High, became a member of the union bargaining team in 1967 and was first elected Livonia Education Association president in 1970.

"I was president in Livonia when we had our only two-week strike," Geiger said.

Some pressing education-related issues of his time in Livonia included reducing class size. "Livonia was growing so fast," Geiger recalled, "and moving away from self-contained classrooms."

That led centered on the idea that a team of four teachers could effectively teach 120 students gathered in a large classroom. It failed.

"We discovered that teaching 120 students together was a very difficult task," Geiger recalled.

WHILE HE misses teaching, Geiger finds his work with the NEA rewarding.

"I absolutely am convinced that the strongest force for positive change in education is the NEA. "Everyone is into education reform," said Geiger, "those are

the buzzwords today. Unfortunately, these people are talking about more hours, more teaching days, more tests — we want to test everything that moves," he said. "More is not necessarily better."

"We don't educate 25 to 30 percent of the youngsters in America. That hasn't changed from the past but, today, we can't afford not to educate those youngsters," he said, adding that the cost to pay welfare or house them in prisons is higher.

Echoing an issue that concerned him in Livonia, Geiger said reducing class size to a 1-5 ratio — or even 1-1 in some cases — could help solve the problem.

Geiger and wife Janet live in Fairfax, Va., where she is a third-grade teacher. They have two sons.

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