

Gov. Engler vetoes school bond bill

Gov. John Engler has vetoed a bill giving school districts power to issue bonds to purchase high-tech equipment and computers.

The governor said Senate Bill 597 went too far and offered to sign a modified version if passed by the Legislature.

"I will support an amendment to the school code that does allow bonding for furnishing of partially remedial schools and for technological hardware for instructional purposes," Engler said, "as long as language is included that ensures that the bonds for technology cannot be issued for longer than the useful life of the equipment."

The governor also opposed:

- Allowing school districts to re-tend bonds at higher interest rates if the bonds were consolidated with a new debt issue.
- Using sinking funds for the purchase of new technology.

Engler's veto message was received last week by the Senate, which placed the bill on its calendar. The Senate did not take it up during Wednesday's all-day session over the teachers labor relations act. The Senate canceled its Thursday session.

Cable from page 1A

Rapids, Iowa

She has a master's degree from the University of Michigan and taught and coached forensics in Faribault schools.

"We were looking for someone who had management skills and someone who recognizes the public relations aspects of the job," said SWOCC board member and Farmington City Manager Frank Laubach. "She brings both of those to the position."

Collins and other SWOCC

Hearing from page 1A

kept on after he was laid off.

"When they hired him, they said they were grossly understaffed," said attorney Julie Ferstman, who is representing Mathis. "Then they laid him off while keeping other people with less seniority who were white."

The case has been plagued by delays. The state Attorney General's Office had cutbacks due to the budget, which meant its attorneys could not pursue the case. Ferstman said. Then the attorney originally assigned to represent Mathis, Tom Marshall, had to disqualify himself because he had done work for Color Tile, the national chain that bought Kay and Kay Tile in November of 1993.

But Susan Greenspan, the attorney representing Color Tile, said the timing seems unusual.

"Nobody prosecuted this case for three years," she said. "Now they put it on the front burner. There certainly is no racial discrimination at this company."

A final order to resolve the case will be issued by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission, which is conducting the hearing. If the charge is upheld, the commission could order the company to reinstate Mathis with back pay and benefits.

The order also could include compensation for any mental anguish suffered by Mathis.

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"We could always bid, but nobody would give us a bid because it would be a shot in the dark," Webb said.

Added to the confusion is the bill stipulates the policyholder is not subject to negotiations. Under most circumstances, the policyholder is considered the employer.

However, MESSA considers individual members as policy holders, according to Sue Zurvalec, director of employee relations.

"The question is: Who is the policyholder?" Zurvalec said.

Farmington Education Association spokeswoman Zan Alley did

not discuss the bill's specifics.

"I'm not an insurance expert," Alley said. "Until someone can analyze the bill, I don't know."

"It's amazing to me an insurance act that provides the best insurance at a competitive price should be targeted by the Republicans to be destroyed."

A mistake in a price quote by MESSA led to the arbitration hearing before Breck.

During contract negotiations in 1992, the school board was originally quoted a figure of \$4.2 million for medical insurance coverage. After the contract was set-

led, MESSA said it made a mistake in figuring its premiums.

MESSA agreed to absorb the first year of the mistake. However, the district would be responsible for the rest, which was \$3.2 million.

The district opted for another administrator, Michigan Employee Benefit Services, off-setting half of the \$3.2 million figure.

Both MESSA and MEBS use Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

MESSA has continued to provide insurance for union employees, without the district paying the bills, pending the judge's ruling.

ing, Alley said. MEBS is provided to nonunion employees and new hires.

"My understanding is that there has been great problems with it," Alley said. "Which is what we've predicted all along."

There were problems in getting claims processed initially, Zurvalec said. Part of the problem was that Blue Cross/Blue Shield was on strike at the time, she said.

"All of that has been straightened out," Zurvalec said. "Things have been proceeding along very smoothly."

Questions answered on 'teacher strike' bill

BY TIM RICHARD
STAFF WRITER

Q. The metro media called it the "teacher strike" bill. Your paper emphasized that it curbs the Michigan Education Association's bargaining power. Why?

A. Teacher strikes are highly emotional but affect only two to 15 districts a year — of 562 public school districts. So strikes aren't that significant overall.

Most reporters failed to read the fine print that is so important to parents, taxpayers and school people. Gov. John Engler clearly has his eye on curbing MEA power to bargain control of school change.

The new law says flatly, "A public school employer has the responsibility, authority, and right to manage and direct" schools. MEA lobbyist Al Short noted that school boards have bargained away those rights. Well, the boards can't do that any more.

You can't make a contract, however willingly, contrary to public policy. Rich folks learned that lesson when Franklin D. Roosevelt took the U.S. off the gold standard and refused to repay bonds in gold.

Q. Engler talked a lot about "school quality" last year. What effect does this law have?

A. It prohibits the MEA from even bargaining school quality issues covered by law. Examples:

- School hours — The Christmas Eve laws say school will be extended from 180 days to more than 200 in steps. MEA can't bargain that.
- School improvement commit-

tees — "Site-based decision-making" is the rage, and it's a big issue in right-wing circles. MEA can't bargain composition of those committees.

- Public school academies — School boards can organize any number. MEA can't bargain how many. (On the other hand, the law Engler got says church-related groups can't get charters, and certified teachers must be used.) School boards come out ahead.

- Use of volunteers in schools — MEA can't bargain it.
- Experimental and pilot program staffing on technology and delivery of teaching services — MEA can't bargain it.
- Q. We've heard talk of cost-cutting...

A. Correction: "Cost containment" is the official jargon.

The big one is that MEA can't bargain "the policyholder of an employee group insurance benefit." MEA can still bargain the level of benefits, but not the administrator.

MEA owns a subsidiary called MESSA, which has hundreds of jobs and which pays the union a fee for bargaining on its behalf. The new law allows school boards to put health insurance up for bids. MESSA is now on the same playing field as commercial insurance administrators.

Critics of MEA say this will save school districts \$1 billion a year. With a total budget of \$10 billion, that's an immense saving, if true.

Q. MEA types say Engler has awakened "a sleeping giant" which will retaliate against him.

A. The "giant" is Big Labor — the AFL-CIO. It hardly lifted a finger on the MEA's behalf. Frank Garrison, the big chief, issued one press release supporting the MEA's position, didn't send in a lobbyist, and made no visible effort to call out his troops. He let the MEA fight this one alone.

Garrison once called the MEA "whores" for supporting a few Republicans. He has never recanted.

This sleeping giant argument could go either way. We won't know until after the law takes effect in 1995.

Rank-and-file blue-collar workers are known to resent the \$60,000 salaries some suburban teachers get and statewide average of \$43,600 "for nine months work." Blue-collar workers don't have a MESSA administering their health benefits generously. Blue-collar workers lose a day's pay for a day's strike, a penalty teachers won't face until 1995.

Q. What about the teachers' behavior in all of this?

A. They flipped the governor the Nazi salute (which this reporter did not witness) and booed from the Senate galleries, a serious breach of decorum. You be the judge. Would your teachers have tolerated such behavior from kids?

Q. Democrats say this new law will leave teachers in a worse position than blue-collar workers.

A. Could be. Let's say teachers strike five days. They will lose five days pay. But the law still calls for 180 class days. They'll get only 175 days pay.

Look for a court challenge over

the "involuntary servitude" words in the Constitution.

Q. Are we correct that Republican support for this bill was soft?

A. Very. Republicans had a 22-16 Senate majority. One GOP seat was vacated when the lawmaker went to Congress.

Two Republicans — Fred Dillingham of Powersville and Jon Clisby of Saginaw — voted against the bill. Dillingham considers himself a philosophical Republican but for two years has railed, publicly, against the GOP stand on labor issues — MEA, unemployment compensation, auto insurance.


No less a GOP personage than majority floor leader Phil Arthurs put up an amendment that would have eliminated many curbs on MEA power. He voted for the final tough bill but must have been holding his nose.

In the Senate, Republicans had to truck in the ailing David Hanigman from his West Bloomfield sick bed to get their 19th vote. In the House, they had to delay the final vote until 11:55 p.m. to bring in one member from the airport.

Q. With their temporary House majority, weren't Republicans in a bit of a rush to wreak vengeance on the teachers' union?

A. Republicans waited 29 years for this. After the Lyndon Johnson landslide of 1964, Democrats took over the Legislature, and their first agenda item was to give public employees broad collective bargaining rights.

It was a normal day in Lansing.



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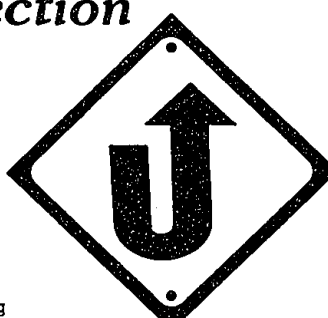
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