

POINTS OF VIEW

Who wins with teacher strike bill? — everyone

The Michigan House of Representatives passed House Bill 5128 on April 13. The objective of the bill was to clearly establish the responsibilities of school boards and teachers concerning the management of our schools.

Since the passage of the bill there seems to be a great deal of confusion and misinformation over what it contains, partly because the bill went through so many drafts before final approval.

I would like to take this opportunity to clarify the contents of House Bill 5128, which now has many names:

"cost containment" by some, and "union busting" and "teacher bashing" by others.

What is the truth? Everyone wants to know who won and who lost. I think parents, teachers, taxpayers and children all won. Please let me explain.

It is true House Bill 5128 removes some items from the collective bargaining process. It is significant to note the major concerns that teachers asked the legislature to protect, such as teachers' right to negotiate salary increases, benefit packages, insurance carrier, length

of the school year and length of pupil contact time are preserved.

Teachers are guaranteed a role in site-based decision making and with House Bill 5128 have one more mediation option when negotiators reach an impasse.

The future economic health of Michigan depends on a well-educated work force. Parents want a high-quality school system for their children and taxpayers insist on containing costs. Everyone wins.

Since 1965 there has been a law prohibiting teacher strikes. HB 5128 has reduced the threat simply by putting teeth into that law and now boards face stiff fines for employee lockouts.

Neither the parents, who are understandably concerned, nor the teachers, who are trained professionals, ever describe a strike as a constructive experience. Divisive strikes can scar a community and damage relationships for years. House Bill 5128 does give officials, who are elected by the voters to set school policy, the statutory authority to manage and direct school operations.

There has been much discussion

QUEST COLUMNIST



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about what is prohibited from collective bargaining with this bill. You should know what is still "on the table." All the following issues are negotiable:

■ Salaries and health care benefits. The bargaining unit is still able to bargain for salary, insurance carrier (MESSA) and the level of benefits. HB 5128 simply makes the school district the policyholder, which makes it possible for boards to obtain the rating experience information they need to ob-

tain competitive bids on the negotiated health-care package. If any savings are realized on the negotiated health-care package agreed to by teachers, those funds can be used to increase other benefits, buy more classroom materials (so teachers won't have to use their own money to buy these materials), or be used for other purposes decided in collective bargaining.

■ Length of the school year. While HB 5128 removes the starting date from collective bargaining, teachers can bargain the length of the school year beyond the 180-day benchmark. The school code requires a 180-day school year.

■ Student contact time. Teachers can still bargain the length of student contact time within the constraints of the school code.

HB 5128 was modified many times during debate. There were seven drafts between the time it was introduced and the time it was passed by the House and Senate. The "open shop" provision of the original version was not part of the final bill.

In addition, many of the management rights contained in the original

bill that prompted some critics to accuse the bill's supporters of micromanaging schools were also not part of the final bill.

I voted for HB 5128 because I believe it represents the will of the majority of the citizens, and because I believe it gives school boards the policy-making authority they are entitled to as elected officials who represent the community.

I firmly believe HB 5128 preserves a collective bargaining process that enables teachers' representatives to negotiate issues that are important to the majority of teachers.

In time I believe HB 5128 will restore public support and faith in our school system by assuring taxpayers they will have a strong voice in the management of their schools.

In the end, teachers who have the support of parents and other residents will be recognized for the enormous contributions they make to our communities and compensated for their efforts.

Jan Dolan is a Republican state representative from Farmington Hills. She is up for reelection this year.

Let's pay attention to what's behind teen violence

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me. So goes the old adage.

It comes out of a younger, simpler time, when as small children we ganged up against, let's say Sally, on the school playground, calling her names.

Seeing a problem, the playground teacher would come over, break up the group and organize a game of "Rover, Red Rover, will Sally come over." And the group would work off its steam and Sally would have her feelings assuaged — at least for the time being.

Now, we're in a more complicated day and age. It's Monday morning at a local high school, not grade school.

There is no adult around when Sally is insulted over the weekend to break up the incident and help those involved handle their feelings.

And now, some misdirected young people have stored up that anger and decided to take it out with their fists.

And now a 16-year-old lies dying.

Some are saying it was just a fight in a parking lot. It could have happened anywhere at any school — and it does on a regular basis. It just happened, it appears, that in this case the victim struck his head when he fell, and . . .

But it's more complicated even than that. Because some students involved were Chaldean. And that may invoke



JUDITH DONER BERNE

stereotypes.

"Listen, this is not an ethnic act," says Sharkey Haddad, executive director of the Chaldean Federation of

America. "Violence is uncommon within the Chaldean community," he says. "Fights and violence don't happen. We're all related to each other."

It occurred, Haddad believes, despite that code, because society is getting more violent.

"I personally think the youth are really going through the toughest time. We are not paying enough attention. They are hungry for attention."

Are our children turning to violence because we have been too self-absorbed to give them our attention?

Are our children turning to violence because they sense the outrage of some adults over having to pay taxes for

their schooling?

Are our children turning to violence because we allow them to watch whatever they choose on TV and in films?

Are our children turning to violence because that's what they read and see in news reports?

Are our children turning to violence because we refuse to ban the sale and manufacture of assault weapons?

Are our children turning to violence because they see it in their homes?

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." An insult is an unpleasant thing. But it is violence that unleashed this tragedy.

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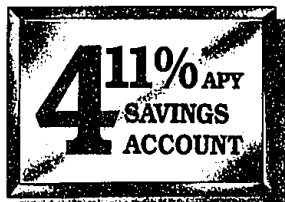
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