

points of view

Geiger — Local roots shape NEA's best bet

SCHOOL IS OUT for the summer. The kids are back at home. This is a time of relaxation before the serious finger-pointing starts this fall about the schools.

Easiest target is the teachers and their unions. "The biggest problem with the schools is the goddamned teachers unions" is a complaint as common as remarks about the rainy weather.

That may be so. It's more than likely, for example, that the real reason the state Legislature and the governor have never gotten together on school financing is that the Michigan Education Association (the biggest teachers union in Michigan) always wanted more money up front than political cowardice could sustain.

BUT TEACHERS unions are a fact of life. Virtually all teachers in Michigan public schools are unionized. That means that even if you buy the idea that teachers unions are part of the problem, they must also be part of the solution to the "rising tide of mediocrity" that has made the education of our kids the biggest gripe subject of the decade.

That is why insiders will be paying close attention to what happens this Thursday in Washington, when some 8,000 teacher members of the National Education Association open their convention. (The NEA is the biggest national teachers union, akin to the UAW or the Steelworkers.)

What folks do at conventions (besides speechify, pass resolutions, gossip, party and stay up too late) is elect officers. And what folks just might do at this NEA convention is elect a guy from the Michigan suburbs president of the whole darned national teachers union.

His name is Keith Geiger. He used to be president of the Livonia Education Association, and he went on to be president of the Michigan Education Association and then vice president of the NEA.

I've known Keith for 20 years. I think he's quite a guy.

I first met him just after he had been elected president in Livonia. He had a good reputation. He had a math teacher at Stevenson High School. Basketball ref. Good with kids. Hard charger. Tough guy in negotiations. (He was, too, for about the first time he did in Livonia was a lead a long

Observation Point Phillip Power

strike that won a pattern-making settlement.) I got to see him in action about a year later. I forget what the conflict was about, but it had to do with the schools and there was this room filled with people snarling at each other and I walks Keith Geiger. He was tall and friendly looking, and he said, "Let's just see what we can do together to get this thing straightened out."

And he did it, too. Sure, he hung tough with the contract he had negotiated a year earlier. But he was interested in what the parents had to say and he reached out to see just why the businessmen were upset. And, unlike some people I've known, he made it clear right from the start that what happened to the kids was his biggest concern. "Otherwise I wouldn't be a teacher," he said later.

THE POINT I'm trying to make is that Keith Geiger would be an important player, balancing his concerns for his union with his hopes for kids. In a recent letter, he described himself as "a strong negotiator and contract enforcer" but also willing and anxious to reach out to parents, the community and to business to seek solutions together as we try to make education better for all students.

I liked that. And I hope Geiger makes it. Partly because it's nice to think that somebody from around here made it in the really big time. Mostly because I think we've got a terrible problem in public education, and I have a lot of confidence in Geiger's ability, toughness and common sense to help solve it.

Philip Power is chairman of the board of Suburban Communications Corp., the parent company of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

President George Bush said in the campaign that he wants to be the

"education president." The NEA is a major actor in what is bound to be a fierce Washington debate about what to do about our kids and their schooling and especially about who pays what.

GEIGER points out that the federal share of education expenditures has been dropping steadily for years. Now at less than 7 percent of the total, the decline in federal support is one of the root causes for fights about education finance in states like Michigan. He argues that "we must convince the country that education, like defense, is a matter of national survival," but at the same time he says that the NEA should develop "analytic models" that can evaluate how to get a bigger educational impact for each scarce dollar spent.

Should he make it to the presidency of the NEA, Geiger would be an important player, balancing his concerns for his union with his hopes for kids. In a recent letter, he described himself as "a strong negotiator and contract enforcer" but also willing and anxious to reach out to parents, the community and to business to seek solutions together as we try to make education better for all students.

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Friend of the court

Paperwork bogs down county agency

By Philip A. Sherman
staff writer

Oakland County's Friend of the Court application for the 1989 contract year, synonymous with its operating budget, will likely go before the board of commissioners Thursday for approval.

Joseph Salamone, the Friend of the Court chief who took over the position last March, also said his office, with 56,000 active cases, is considering an optical storage system to decrease paperwork.

If approved, Salamone's new operating budget will be \$4.18 million, about the same as last year. The county will pick up \$2.7 million, and the rest will come from \$2 service fees charged for file maintenance, Salamone said.

SALAMONE PRESENTED the recommendation for contract approval to the board's finance committee last Thursday. Since the funding is through a cooperative reimbursement program with state participation, Salamone said the budget is considered a contract. Currently, the court is operating on its old contract.

"The continuation is the same plus the expansion," Salamone said. Expansion items — anything over the \$4.18 million base operating budget — are approved as amendments and would include inflation and general operating expenses, Salamone said.

Not including about 20 co-op students working this summer, Salamone said the Friend of the Court has 106 full-time employees. A 48-hour segment with Dan Rather last December portrayed Oakland County's Friend of the Court as being one of the most effectively run such offices in the country.

TO THAT END, Salamone also told the finance committee his office is searching for an optical storage system to decrease paperwork. "I hope they're in the process of getting competitive bids right now," he said. Salamone said the system he's looking for will immediately scan a document and make it available to anyone linked to the system.

"As it stands now, the Friend of the Court must get a copy of every pleading of divorce with children. A duplicate also goes to the county clerk — we could cut down on duplicate filings." "It is not a cheap system to install, but it will be a great time savings," he said.


Color photos tell parks story

A color photo exhibit featuring facilities, activities and events at the nine Oakland County parks will be on display in four communities this summer.

The exhibit will be displayed in Birmingham at Baldwin Public Library from June 27 through July 18; in Rochester at Winchester Mall from July 18 to Aug. 8; in Troy at

the South Oakland Credit Union from Aug. 8 to 29, and in Pontiac at the Oakland County Employees Credit Union from Aug. 29 to Sept. 18.

Brochures on camping, swimming, golf and nature study will accompany the exhibit. For more information, call 858-0906.



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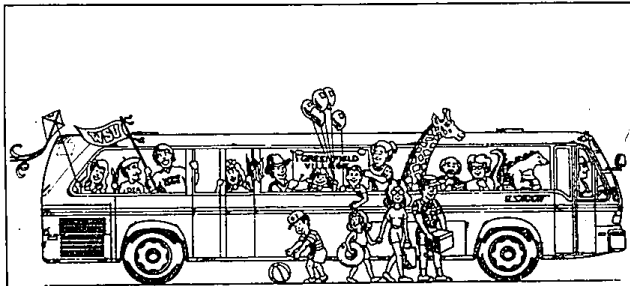
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