Communications
Before, During and After
Bargaining

Chris Davis
Presentation to the
Michigan Association of School Boards
February 27, 2015

Background
- 6 Affiliated Bargaining Groups
- 1,400 Employees
- 10,000 Students
- 302 Square Miles of District
- $89,000,000 General Fund Budget
- $111,000,000 Total Fund Budget

Background
- Previous budget carried over $3.2 million in targeted concessions
- Facing $6 million in cuts
- Previous negotiations with MEA had been “noisy”: “demonstration” attendance at Board Meetings; “spinning” information to members, community and media; attacks on the Board of Education, etc.
- Elections: Inexperienced Board of Education
- Settled contracts with most other unions: 4% total compensation concessions
- Good relationship day-to-day: union ↔ administration
Background

- MEA had a history of trying to gain public sentiment using “not completely true” statements about negotiations.
- Traditional Bargaining Posture: Start far apart and narrow table positions as we go.
- MEA strategy of dividing Board and Superintendent, Superintendent and Executive Director of HR, staff and Board negotiating team.
- Convergence: Huge cuts looming, need for clear and consistent communication with staff and community, and urgency of time.

Beginning of Negotiations

- New Players: Superintendent, Uni-Serve, Union President.
- Inexperienced Board.
- “Spin” addressed when MEA goes to community, not until then.
- Experienced and effective negotiator.

Factors in Place

- Financial "time bomb" ticking: deficit spending, declining enrollment, state budget cuts.
- Legislation dramatically changed bargaining laws.
- Relatively “healthy” reports on revenue coming from the State Government.
- Good relationship day-to-day: union & administration.
Root Cause Analysis: Focus

What were the basic problems we had to deal with and what was the root cause?

- Needed to eliminate a structural deficit
- Needed to make sure communication with our staff, community, and media was accurate
- Needed to limit “spin” so that table positions were clear

Message to Deliver

- Staff and community needed to understand the connection between the budget deficit and the bargaining position of the Board.
- Communication will help foster trust and keep the Board focused on reducing the structural deficit.

Future Condition

- Settled contract that reflects 4% to 5% reduction in total compensation
- Foster trust in communications between the Board and negotiating team, negotiating team and MEA, board and staff, and board and community
Strategy: Administration

- No Cracks in the Dam: 100% Board Support
- Educate the Board: MEA tactics once we inform them of our intentions

Strategy: Board/Negotiating Team

- Narrow my initial proposal to the settlement parameter
- Post table positions on the district web page within 48 hours of submission
- All bargaining groups to demonstrate consistency

Strategy Continued

- Refer staff, community, and media to the website when inquiries are made about negotiations
- Include media = posting of the positions on the website
Counter Strategy

- Threats: “This is a big mistake and will take negotiations to a much bigger arena.”
- Immediately tried to engage Board of Education
- Request to “negotiate” the conditions of the web postings
- MEA to Media: District is trying to “discredit” the union

Consequences for Board

- Narrowed negotiations parameters
- Community perception: Board position is aligned with budget and is fair to employees
- Employees updated regularly: fostered better understanding of the relationship between budget and negotiations

Consequences Continued

- Eliminated impact of MEA “spin”
- Strengthened Board’s resolve = community support
- Reduced “demonstration” attendance at Board meetings
- Reduced clarification communications: staff, media, community
Outcome

- Sped up negotiations
- Settlement = 4% total compensation reduction
- Became “normal”
- Set an expectation by community, staff and media for future negotiations
- Recognized and commended by: MSBO, Mackinaw Center for Public Policy, and local media for transparency in negotiations

Union Strategies

- Union tried to avoid giving proposal
- Minimal misinformation
- Minimal “demonstration” attendance at Board meetings

Agree Upon Numbers

- 1% salary increase
- Step costs
- Insurance costs
- Retirement costs
- etc., etc., etc.
Subsequent Negotiations

- Posting proposals is expected practice
- Narrower initial proposals
- Significant reduction in questions about negotiations

What CAN You Communicate

- Status of negotiations
- Financial conditions and assumptions
- Proposals
- Costs of proposals

Prohibiteds are Prohibited

- Remove all prohibited subjects from contract
- Don’t allow Board policies to be grieved
No Unfair Labor Practice If...

- District gives proposal to union **before** posting
- District posts proposals on website and gives proposals to Board and employees **after** giving to union

Communicating

- Chief spokesperson
- Facts and Briefs

Communicating at Board Meetings:

- Public comment policy
- Time limits
- Larger facility
Communicating Internally:

- Use Administrative Team
- Be out with staff
- Newsletters
- Social media

Communicating Externally:

- Media
- Chamber of Commerce
- Parents
- Students
- Community

Effective Communications:

- Union vs. teachers
- Honest and accurate
- No name calling
Successful Bargaining:

- Prepare, prepare, prepare
- Anticipate
- Stay positive and professional
- Don’t take it personal

Questions?

Chris Davis
Executive Director of Human Resources & Labor Relations
Traverse City Area Public Schools
412 Webster Street
Traverse City, MI 49686
(231) 933-1711
davisch@tcaps.net