

# The Developing Crisis in Our Schools

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Results of a Research Survey of  
Southeast Wisconsin School Employees

Released by School Employees United  
organized professional educators  
in Southeast Wisconsin

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## Results of a Research Survey of Southeast Wisconsin School Employees

### Introduction

Governor Walker's record on education is currently a highly contentious issue. This report represents a second systematic research effort into the effects of recent changes to educational funding and school employee bargaining rights implemented by the Governor.

Almost four thousand educators from almost fifty southeast Wisconsin school districts participated in this survey during the month of October, one month into the school year. Almost all of the districts' employees no longer have full collective bargaining rights. The survey results paint a disturbing picture of what is already happening in area districts. Among the results:

- 43.5% of respondents say class sizes are increasing
- 78.2% of respondents disagree with the statement that the schools are the same or better off than last year
- 75.8% of respondents say their school district has fewer resources this year to meet the needs of all children as individuals
- 57% of respondents have recently considered leaving their profession
- 71.5% of respondents would not recommend a career in education to a friend or college student

These results are especially disturbing given widespread agreement among district administrators that next year's funding shortage will be significantly worse than this year. The districts in the survey combined had over \$13 million in federal Education Jobs Fund money available that will not be available next year.

Equally important, the survey results point clearly to an impending crisis in the teaching profession. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that use of the governor's "tools" are making it more difficult to teach effectively and reducing the attractiveness of remaining in the profession. Quality teachers are the single most important "in school" factor in the success of our schools. We are not likely to attract the most talented students to the teaching profession if current policies towards school funding and collective bargaining rights continue.

Employees in the following school districts participated in the survey: Arrowhead, Brown Deer, Cedar Grove-Belgium, Cedarburg, Cudahy, Elmbrook, Erin Elementary, Fox Point-Bayside, Franklin, Freiss Lake Elementary, Germantown, Glendale-River Hills, Grafton, Greendale, Greenfield, Hamilton-Sussex, Hartford High, Hartford Joint #1 Elementary, Herman Elementary, Kettle Moraine, Kewaskum, Maple Dale-Indian Hill, Menomonee Falls, Mequon-Thiensville, Mukwonago, Muskego, Neosho Elementary, New Berlin, Nicolet, Northern Ozaukee, Oak Creek, Oconomowoc, Oostburg, Pewaukee, Random Lake, Richfield Elementary, Saylesville Elementary, Shorewood, Slinger, South Milwaukee, St. Francis, Watertown, Waukesha, Wauwatosa, West Allis-West Milwaukee, West Bend, Whitefish Bay, Whitnall

## **Background**

“There is no time to prepare and grade and be overall creative. I feel like I am just treading water and my students are not getting my best.”

With the exception of the recent release of an annual survey of school district superintendents by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), most of the evidence offered in the debate over the impact of Governor Walker’s policies on our schools is anecdotal. This study is an attempt to gather information directly from front line school district employees, who are in the best position to know first hand about the impact of the recent changes in school funding and collective bargaining.

The study consists of a forty-eight question survey of school district employees in southeast Wisconsin (excluding Milwaukee Public Schools), seeking information that is directly relevant to classroom conditions, programs and services offered at schools and conditions relating the strength and quality of the teaching profession. Almost 4,000 employees including teachers, counselors, library media specialists and support staff responded to the survey.

The results of the survey paint a troubling picture of public schools that are distinctly worse off this year than last. Responses to questions directly relating to the quality of education provided this year suggest that reduced staff and other resources are already having a significant impact on many schools. The responses in this area are similar to the findings of the DPI superintendents’ survey.

Responses to questions relating to the morale and job satisfaction of teachers and other educators in Milwaukee area schools are even more disturbing, suggesting a significant problem for attracting and retaining the best possible teachers in the years to come.

## **Methods**

Surveys were distributed to professional and support professional employees in 48 districts in southeast Wisconsin. Staff at Milwaukee Public Schools were excluded from the survey. Of the approximately 12,189 employees in the represented school districts, 3,800 completed the survey. The survey required 20 to 35 minutes to complete depending on the extent that the respondent supplemented their responses with written comments.

Respondents answered several demographic questions which enabled us to see whether they were a representative sample of school district employees in Wisconsin. Demographically, the survey’s respondents are very similar to Wisconsin school district employees in general, based on respondent characteristics including: gender (75% female), median experience (16 to 17 years), teaching level (44% elementary, 35% high school), and teaching position (64% of teachers are classroom teachers).

Given the availability of the survey and the demographics of the respondents, we have significant reason to believe we have a representative sample of school employees in the Milwaukee area. More importantly, information from almost four thousand front line school district employees is significantly more authoritative than many of the individual district anecdotes that are buttressing arguments made in the current debate.

## **Are Our Schools are Better Off This Year?**

Several questions were asked that are directly pertinent to the quality of education provided at the represented school districts this year. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that there are now fewer resources and less ability to meet the needs of all students. Some of the reduction in quality of education, such as less preparation time and more job responsibilities unrelated to direct student contact, is directly tied to use of the “tools” that the Governor encourages school districts to use.

“I don't get time to develop new activities, I do not get time to give students as much individual attention, I have more paper work so I don't get to grading like I would like so students do not get as much or as immediate feedback.”

\* For the most part, schools are the same or better than last school year.

78.2% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement  
8.6% agree or strongly agree with this statement

**\*\* When you exclude the 13.2% of respondents who stated that they did not know how schools compared to last school year, the percentage of either disagree or disagree strongly with the statement that schools are the same or better than last school year rises to an astonishing 90.1%.**

\*Do you believe that your District has fewer resources this year to meet the needs of all children as individuals?

75.8% answered “yes”  
24.2% answered “no”

\*Have class sizes increased this school year over last year?

43.5% answered “yes”  
56.5% answered “no”

“With so many students in a class, it is hard to reach them all. No matter how hard I try, I can no longer have personal contact with every kid every day.”

\*Has the employer decreased the amount of your preparatory time provided to you during the work day?

34.4% answered “yes”  
65.6% answered “no”

\*Have changes in your work schedule, work day and/or work load made you less effective as an educator?

43.5% answered “yes”  
56.5% answered “no”

“The stress and time constraints keep me from being more creative. I am in survival mode.”

## **Attracting and Retaining Quality Teachers and Other Educators**

Several questions were asked relating directly to school districts’ ability to attract and retain teachers and other educators. The results show that many school district employees are losing more compensation than the bottom line pension and health insurance contributions agreed to by public sector unions. Significantly, many employees indicate that further use of the Governor’s “tools” to reduce their compensation will create extreme economic duress for them. The belief that more compensation cuts are coming is creating extreme anxiety for many employees. Overall, the responses suggest that the changes brought about by funding cuts and the loss of collective bargaining rights will likely create serious shortages of quality educators in the very near future.

“Having worked so hard for 15 years, paying my way for many years of education, and having all rights stripped and taking a pay cut doesn't seem worth it. Teaching now seems like a very thankless job.”

\*How would you rate morale among staff since last February?

“It's gotten worse” – 74.6%

“No change” – 19.7%

“It's gotten better” – 5.6%

\*In the past 12 months, have you regretted your decision to pursue a career in education?

50.8% answered “yes”

49.2% answered “no”

\*Have you considered leaving the education profession during the past 12 months?

57% answered “yes”

43% answered “no”

“The stress, lack of sleep, feeling unappreciated, and devalued in the community are wearing on my mind. I struggle to keep positive and creative at times ”

\*Would you recommend a career in education to a new college student or friend?

28.5% answered “yes”

71.5% answered “no”

“I did not expect to become a middle class villain. I had to explain to my 6th grader that I was not lazy and sucking off system...like one of his friend's dad said!”

\*Aside from your significantly increased contributions to your pension and health benefits, have you faced other increased costs or losses in compensation this year compared to last year?

37.3% answered “yes”

62.7% answered “no”

\*Has your employer decreased any other benefits for employees (sick leave, vacation, holidays, disability, life insurance, etc.)?

34.1% answered “yes”

43.8% answered “no”

**\*\*When you exclude the 22.1% of respondents who stated that they did not know whether other benefits have been reduced, the percentage of respondents answering with a Yes increases to 43.7%..**

“Based on my previous contract, I invested \$37,000.00 and countless hours into a master's degree program, completed before our contract was turned illegal, and my district chose not to honor it, or the financial compensation that would come with it. I had to turn down purchasing a house for my new and growing family, as I lost money from my check, gained a student loan payment, and saw no increase in pay for services rendered.”

\*Has your employer modified the value of graduate work by limiting lane advancement or lane compensation, tightening up on credit approval, or reducing tuition reimbursement?

58.5% answered “yes”

13.4% answered “no”

***\*\*When you exclude the 28.2% of respondents who stated that they did not know whether the value of their professional development has been diminished by their employer's use of tools, 81.4% of respondents stated that it had been diminished.***

“What is happening in other districts creates an uncertain future for what might be in-store within our district.”

“I believe in our district the proverbial shoe has yet to drop. I don't think they had time to really decide what changes they wanted to make. By "they", I mean the school board. I believe that next year, once they've had a chance to really think about all the ways they can take advantage, they will. It's already in the apparently arbitrary changes that have been made in the calendar and other small ways.”

\*What would the effect of further compensation cuts be on your household?

“You could cut costs and come out alright” – 50.9%

“Would induce a major life change like selling your house” – 33.5%

“Could not be sustained and may make you leave the state or the profession” – 15.6%

## **Workplace Fairness and Voice**

Questions were asked that relate directly or indirectly to educators' basic workplace rights and their ability to weigh in on school district decisions regarding educational practice.

“I am in the sunset years of my career, but am watching our youngest teachers question their life's career, our mid-career teachers feel trapped, and our senior educators being driven out; this makes me genuinely heartbroken for our profession”

\*Do you feel you have less academic freedom under the new collective bargaining environment?

65.5% answered “yes”

34.5% answered “no”

\*Do you feel comfortable sharing work-related issues and concerns with administrators?

51.8% answered “no”  
48.2% answered “yes”

\*Rate your concern about you job security?

“No concern” or “Limited concern” – 45.7%  
“Concerned” or “Very concerned” – 54.4%

“As a young teacher, I am concerned about job security. I love what I do, but I'm not sure I feel comfortable doing it in a public school setting... definitely considered what else I could do with myself professionally...”

\*How does your level of concern about your job security (as noted in the immediately preceding question) compare to last year?

“a lot more stressed” or “somewhat more stressed” – 76.5%  
“stress level has not changed” – 19.8%  
“somewhat less stressed” or “much less stressed” – 3.7%

\*Do you believe collective bargaining rights should be restored?

95.4% answered “yes”  
4.6% answered “no”

## **Looking forward**

Looking forward, the Governor and many school districts have been talking about establishing some form of merit pay for educators. Respondents generally believe that merit pay would be administered unfairly and would reduce collaboration. They are especially negative towards merit pay based on test scores.

\*Do you believe merit pay would decrease teacher collaboration?

60.1% answered “yes”  
17.1% answered “no”

**\*\*When you exclude the 22.9% of respondents who stated that they did not know whether merit pay would decrease collaboration, the percentage of respondents who answered Yes rises to 77.9%.**

\*If budgets are tight, do you believe your administrators would fairly evaluate employees when awarding any sort of merit pay?

33.4% answered “yes”  
66.6% answered “no”

\*Do you feel that teacher evaluation and pay should be linked to student test scores?

3.5% answered “yes”  
96.5% answered “no”

Special thanks to the following retired members  
who helped to analyze the written survey responses:

Sue Bogdon, Art Fiet, Peggy Fullmer, Carol Krogmann,  
Kathleen O'Brien, Linda Riesen, Eileen Roth, Kay Seamonson,  
Peggy Schouten, Rosalie Tocco, and Phyllis Wetzel

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