

UniServ Representative's Report --- January 2012

NEWS (Network for Excellence in Washington Schools) Decision Issued -- We won!

In a monumental and historic victory for the students and citizens of Washington, the Washington State Supreme Court today ruled last Thursday that the State of Washington is violating its constitutional paramount duty to “amply fund” public education. The Court also made it clear that funding public education is the state's highest priority -- and the state Legislature cannot delay or sidestep any longer. The 85-page opinion also said that the judiciary would keep an eye on lawmakers to make sure they fully implement education reforms by 2018 (the existing timeline set three years ago by SB 2261). "The court cannot idly stand by as the Legislature makes unfulfilled promises for reform," Justice Debra Stephens wrote in the majority opinion. This is a big win for Washington students and schools!

For nearly a decade, HEA, WEA and the other hundreds of partners in the Network for Excellence in Washington Schools (NEWS) have been arguing that public education in our state is woefully underfunded. Our students and schools can no longer bear the impact of further funding cuts. Now, the state Supreme Court has agreed. The legislature can no longer punt on full funding for public education. The Supreme Court has made it clear: No more excuses; no more delays. Lawmakers convene January 9th for a 60-day session. Let's be sure we remind them frequently and forcefully of their paramount duty to amply fund public education.

Read the Washington Supreme Court Decision: <http://www.courts.wa.gov/opinions/pdf/843627.opn.pdf>

Visit the Network for Excellence in Washington Schools website: <http://www.waschoolexcellence.org/>

Legislative Update

As you likely know, the Legislature adjourned its special session in December with the majority of its budget-cutting work left undone; thus the 2012 legislative session will begin on January 9th with billions of dollars still to cut from the 2011-13 biennial budget. This work will be made more complicated for legislators by the decision in the NEWS court case (see above). While the NEWS decision is truly great news for public education and affirms what we have known for decades – that the state is not meeting its paramount constitutional duty – it will force legislators to become more ‘creative’ in their budget solutions. This could be good or bad, and we should brace ourselves for a session combatting “Let’s Make a Deal” compromises that offer fewer cuts in exchange for more “reforms.” There are still many legislators who would like to see detrimental changes to evaluation, RIFs, due process, and compensation – not to mention charter schools and threats to collective bargaining (see HCA article below).

The NEWS victory is truly a ray of hope for the future, and if we are to make it a reality, we must keep up the pressure on legislators to comply with the decision in responsible ways that will ensure that a great public education is available to all students, regardless of socioeconomics or geography. As always, visit OurVoice on the web (www.ourvoicewashingtonnea.org), Facebook (www.facebook.com/OurVoiceWEA), and/or Twitter (www.twitter.com/OurVoiceWEA) for the latest in legislative and other political news.

Proposed Elimination of Collective Bargaining for Benefits

Last spring, the Washington State Health Care Authority (HCA) was tasked with providing the legislature a model for how it would provide a structure for consolidating the purchasing of health benefits for all K-12 employees statewide. Driven by an anti-union agenda, certain politicians in Olympia are pretending they can “save money” by taking over Washington’s K-12 employee health benefit system and giving it to a state health care agency. In reality, it’s a plan based on higher costs, less competition, poor customer service and shifting substantial financial risk onto local school districts and taxpayers - in order to accomplish their true goal of eliminating the right of K-12 employees to locally bargain their health benefits.

Last Friday, the state Health Care Authority (HCA) released a report calling for the state takeover of K-12 school employee health benefits. The report makes it clear that there are no cost savings to taxpayers and, in fact, it will cost more. Meanwhile, health benefits are reduced, competition and accountability are eliminated, and thousands of part time school employees could be cut out of the health benefit system completely. Moreover, according to the Report's Executive Summary, in such a plan, *"Employee health benefits are removed from the scope of collective bargaining laws and employee's health benefit decisions currently bargained among 300+ districts (sic) move to the consolidated purchasing system governing board."*

It is almost a certainty that a bill will be proposed this legislative session to proceed with this plan. This proposal is a very real threat to collective bargaining in our state. If it succeeds, it will likely be the first attempt in a "death by a thousand cuts" strategy to erode bargaining and other union rights in Washington.

Please see the attached information sheet for more details and, if you are interested in asking questions and getting additional information, please attend the next Rainier UniServ Council Pizza & Politics meeting on Tuesday, January 24th! WEA Executive Director John Okamoto will join us to talk more about this issue. We will meet at Bison Creek Pizza in Burien at 5:00 PM. Email Elizabeth (ebeck@washingtonea.org) for more information.

WEA Dependent Verification Questions

Several members have inquired about the reason why WEA and Premera are asking questions regarding employee dependents. Why are they doing this? What about the security of employee information?

As part of our Premera health plans renewal this year, the WEA Board agreed to a dependent verification process. This dependent verification enabled us to get a reduction in premiums over what was anticipated. Members who avail themselves of Premera Health Care Plans have already benefited from this reduction. Historically, when insurers of other companies or groups do this dependent verification process it shows that a significant number of "dependents" are not eligible, costing the rest of us higher premiums. This most frequently happens through honest mistakes, not deliberate wrong-doing. As a result, it is not uncommon for large employers to do periodic audits of their plans.

Security of personal information is always a concern. AON-Hewitt is working with a company which is very experienced with the process. They have established secure systems and regularly, routinely destroy the documents as they process the information members send to them. There is a special PO Box just for this purpose so documents mailed in won't get mixed with other mail; the FAX line is secure, as is the web portal. And finally, all social security numbers are kept separately from dependent verification system. For more information, please visit this Q&A page provided by WEA: <http://www.washingtonea.org/content/docs/pdf/HRBenefitPersonnel.pdf>

The timeline for this process is listed below:

November 18, 2011 Verification Request Notice Mailing
December 23, 2011 Reminder Notice Mailing
January 24, 2012 Communicated Verification End Date Mailing
January 27, 2012 Coverage Termination Notice Mailing
February 22, 2012 Final Results Notice
March 31, 2012 Ineligible Dependents Removed From Plans

As you can see, it is important to submit the required documentation this month (though there appear to be some "last chance" notices that will be sent). If you have questions or problems, you can contact the WEA Select Dependent Verification Team by calling toll-free 1-855-877-0898.