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Ambridge Picket Signs Delay Mortar Boards

The school year in Ambridge Area Schools is concluding not with on time graduation or anticipation the summer vacation will begin on schedule but with a walkout by the teachers and staff. This is the 11th strike in Pennsylvania this school year. The latest report projects the school year will end on June 18th.

We have noted on numerous occasions that the power for teachers to strike without repercussion creates a serious imbalance in bargaining as parents who are inconvenienced push for a swift conclusion so as not to disrupt their routine or plans. School boards can't hire replacement workers and no striking teacher would likely walk off the picket line to teach. Then, amazingly, after all the above transpires, teachers still believe that the salary and benefits they command are the products of a fair and transparent negotiating process.

The pressure in Ambridge will likely be heightened even more since the strike creates problems for finishing up the school year. That not only jeopardizes the graduation ceremony, but arrangements for parties and events and plans for families to attend the ceremony that may have been booked in anticipation.

The teachers' union argument is that they have been without a contract for over a year. And since the district has undertaken a construction and renovation program the teachers are likely looking to get their share of the local tax dollars in the form of a pay increase. But consider that the teachers in the district (which encompasses the municipalities of Ambridge, Baden, Economy, Harmony, and South Heights) are doing pretty well in terms of pay:

- Data from *Stop Teacher Strikes* shows that the average teacher salary for the 2005-06 school year was \$54,670 and the median was just over \$57,000. Of the 194 teacher salaries listed, 135 made \$50,000 or more. 85 in that group made above \$60,000.
- Census Data shows that the weighted average of the median household incomes in the district in 2000 was \$39,170. Increasing this amount by annual percentage change in personal income for the metro area would yield a district household income of just over \$45,000 in 2007.

The fact that teachers in Ambridge are making far more than the folks in the district should not come as a surprise. In a *Policy Brief* from earlier this year (*Volume 7, Number 7*) we expanded upon the findings of a Manhattan Institute study that showed teachers in the Pittsburgh metro area earned more than the typical white collar worker. Measured as a ratio of hourly pay for teachers to hourly pay for white collar employees, Pittsburgh's 1.61 was significantly higher than the national average ratio of 1.36.

And Ambridge taxpayers have virtually no control over spending. True, under the provisions of Act 1, the district is prevented from increasing its tax rates faster than the inflation index (4.5% for the 07-08 year) but it can apply for an exception to the referendum. One of those exceptions is for retirement contributions, which are a fixed percentage of payroll. If this contract gets settled with generous pay increases for the teachers which will only complicate the problem down the road as the pension contribution level is projected to increase steeply.

To be sure, teachers argue they have worked a long time and many have advanced degrees which justify their attempts to increase compensation. But thanks to the state's unwillingness to outlaw strikes or impose some punishment, the rewards in terms of salary, benefits, favorable work conditions, and keeping mediocre teachers on are won not by an even-handed negotiation, but often under the specter of a work stoppage.

If the teachers really wanted to experiment with their comparable worth, they should go back to work and finish the school year and then hit the picket lines during the long, hot summer. All of the intervening pressure from parents with school age children would be removed and the school board and the teachers would have time to hash out what the new contract would look like. That way the teachers could clearly and plainly justify their economic case to the taxpayers.

But don't expect that to happen: the teachers probably don't want to miss their vacation. We must remember that, after all, they are doing this for the good of the kids.

We wish everyone a happy and safe Memorial Day weekend.

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