

Eau Claire support staff mobilize for special ed assistant reclass

Public school support staff perform work that keeps their schools running, work that is essential to the educational mission of Wisconsin's public school system. Unfortunately, this work is too often undervalued by school district administrations, who frequently ignore pressing issues that make it hard to recruit and retain the best school staff. So, after five years of pay freezes, reduced take-home pay, and declining benefits, members of AFT local 4018, the Eau Claire Schools Classified Staff Federation, decided they'd had enough, and made plans to take their issues directly to the school board.

Over the next few weeks, members talked to their coworkers during the day and made calls at night to recruit staff to attend the January 18 board meeting to send a unified message to the board and the administration: that the time to talk about staff compensation and benefits was now. And on the night of the board meeting, 40 staff lined the halls holding signs naming the many outstanding issues that the district needed to address, including step increases, longevity pay, lost vacation days, and particularly a reclassification for special education assistants. As board members entered the building before their meeting, they saw, face to face, the staff that were being harmed by the district's inaction on these issues.



Members of AFT local 4019, the Eau Claire Schools Classified Staff Federation, line the halls before a January board meeting as board member Joe Luginbill enters the building.

During the board meeting, Lynn Christianson, president of local 4018, and Cyndy Heinz, a local member, spoke about the need to show support staff that they are valued by taking their compensation concerns seriously. As her fellow members held up signs throughout the room, Christianson said that fair compensation would "help all of us who have stuck it out during these hard times feel that our time has not been wasted—that our years of service are important, and that you, the board, value their experience and commitment."

The members' action had immediate results. During the meeting, one board member asked the district to cost out union members' requests, and afterwards, the administration met with Christianson to schedule meetings to discuss these issues more fully. And on February 1, the board voted to approve one of the members' most pressing requests, a reclassification and pay increase for special education assistants. "I couldn't be prouder of my fellow members," said Christianson after the reclassification vote. "This win shows what we can accomplish when we stick together."

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State employee coalition hosts teach-in on civil service

Wisconsin's civil service system, implemented over a century ago under governor Bob LaFollette, was one of the first attempts in the United States to end the practice of political patronage—giving government jobs to political supporters. LaFollette and other reformers felt that rather than hiring based on cronyism and corruption, the law should ensure hiring based on merit, so that “the best shall serve the state.” So when Wisconsin Republicans introduced legislation to remove key components of the civil service system, members of AFT-Wisconsin state employee unions quickly mobilized alongside other supporters of clean government, forming the Wisconsin Coalition to Save Civil Service. Alongside their AFSCME union sisters and brothers, AFT-Wisconsin activists organized building meetings to spread the word about the importance of civil service to clean government and effective state agencies.

These efforts culminated in a high-profile teach-in at the state capitol on January 12, which featured Ruth Conniff, editor-in-chief of *The Progressive* magazine; Mike McCabe, president of Blue Jean Nation; Paul Spink, AFSCME Council 32 president; and Kevin Gundlach, president of the South Central Federation of Labor. In front of a packed hearing room, speakers discussed the history of Wisconsin civil service—how it was designed to address political corruption in state hiring, and how it has helped bring in highly qualified state employees for decades—and the dangers of returning to cronyism.

Despite these efforts, Governor Walker signed the bill on February 11. Barb Smith, a founding member of the coalition and of AFT-Wisconsin local 4848, the Wisconsin Professional Employees Council, expressed both disappointment and optimism upon the bill's signing. “Although I'm saddened by this bill becoming law, I'm encouraged by the groundswell of support for clean government from the citizens of Wisconsin, and from my fellow state employees. As public servants, AFT-Wisconsin members and our union sisters and brothers remain committed to providing high quality services to the people of Wisconsin free from political interference.”

Ashland educators organize to form handbook committee

The first version of the employee handbook for the Ashland school district was created with extensive input from members of the Ashland Federation of Teachers (AFT local 1275) and the Ashland Federation of Paraprofessionals (AFT local 4232), with representatives of each union sitting on a handbook committee with the administration. However, the following year, union members were surprised to see substantial changes made without any opportunity for employee input. Members of both locals met to discuss the issue, and decided to organize their coworkers and take the issue to the next district school board meeting, where they would petition the board to re-form the handbook committee as a permanent working group.

Building reps from the teacher and PSRP locals reached out to their coworkers and asked them to attend the next school board meeting in support of the handbook committee proposal. On the night of the meeting, despite cold temperatures and heavy snow, the board room was packed with support staff and teachers as special education assistant Eric Morud and Spanish teacher Anne Chartier spoke to the board about the importance of meaningful employee input into the handbook. “We wish to see the best policies enter the handbook,” said Morud, “policies which don't simply better our work environment, but enable a scholastic environment in which our students will succeed.” In her comments, Chartier said that an open handbook process would display “core values that we work to instill in our students: cooperation, fairness, and democracy. Our practices as a district ought to embody the ideals that we want to teach our students.”

Board members were receptive to the idea, and voted to add the topic to the January meeting's agenda, which was also well-attended by members of both unions. At that meeting, the board voted unanimously to reinstate the handbook committee for the 2016-17 year. Shortly following that meeting, the administration reached out to union leadership to officially form the committee. “I think we made a strong statement to the board” said Morud. “They saw that members of both AFT-Wisconsin locals expect a voice in our workplace. My fellow members and I are looking forward to having a real say in next year's handbook.”