

Lowering class sizes and improving teacher retention in Whitnall

As the school year began, members of the Whitnall Area Federation of Teachers were discussing two disturbing trends. Class sizes had started high and were continuing to grow as the district accepted many open enrollment students. At the same time, many experienced teachers were either finding jobs elsewhere or considering leaving because of the district's extremely slow progress in implementing a compensation plan. With many classes exceeding 30 students and as they faced the loss of highly qualified teachers, WAFT members were concerned about the impact on their working conditions and student learning conditions.

To address class sizes, building reps surveyed coworkers to gather data on raw class sizes and the growing numbers of students with special needs. This gave a much clearer picture than data provided by the district, which merely tracked average class sizes by grade. Lynn Kucharski, WAFT secretary, was shocked by the results. "When you have that many kids sitting in front of you at once, it doesn't matter what the average class size is," she said. "There's less opportunity for individual student help—it makes it more challenging to be able to meet each student's needs."



Members of AFT local 3307, the Whitnall Area Federation of Teachers, attend an April school board meeting to discuss teacher compensation.

Union leaders took this information to district leadership, who agreed that action needed to be taken. For the next school board meeting, WAFT building reps recruited many teachers to present their experiences and ideas as the board discussed the issue. Thanks to these efforts, the board voted to lower average class sizes by roughly two students per grade and to drastically limit their acceptance of open enrollment students, changes that will, members feel, lead to significant improvements in student education.

Alongside these efforts to reduce class size, union leaders and members were also taking action to address compensation and retention. Although a compensation committee had been formed in 2014, progress had slowed, and teachers were getting frustrated. "With [Act 10's] cap on negotiations this year of 0.12%, you're lucky if that gets you a bag of groceries," said Mike Seavert, WAFT president. "Teachers want to see something that's fair and equitable, something that's attainable in their career. When they come in, they want to know what they need to do to get from point A to point B." Seavert contacted the administration to express teachers' frustration with the lack of progress, prompting school board members to take notice.

At the April board meeting, WAFT members again mobilized to support progress on compensation. Board members expressed a desire to see results from the compensation committee, and the administration agreed to add Seavert and Brian Van Buren, WAFT vice president, to the committee. The committee has since met several times, making significant progress. "I'm proud of the efforts of our members and leaders on both of these issues," said Seavert. "Looking forward to next year, we hope that our administration, under the leadership of a new superintendent, will follow through on maintaining lower class sizes, so that we will be able to better reach our students on an individual level. With this accomplishment, as well as having phase one of our compensation system in place this fall, we know that our work is helping to make Whitnall a destination district to attract and retain quality teachers."

Wisconsin Heights teacher invited to White House teacher event

Kathy Evert, an elementary school teacher in the Wisconsin Heights district, was one of a group of teachers from across the United States invited to participate in President Barack Obama's celebration of National Teacher Appreciation Day at the White House. Evert, the co-president of AFT local 1917, represented the AFT at the May 3rd event honoring the national Teacher of the Year Jahana Hayes. "Jahana was effervescent," said Evert. "She exuded intensity and enthusiasm for the profession. She had monumental things to overcome, and she overcame them, and the work she's doing now as a teacher is so impressive. She's teaching for social justice, which is a great example for all of us to reach toward."

At the event, President Obama hailed teaching as a profession with incalculable influence on America's children. Celebrating Teacher Appreciation Day, he said, allows us "to send a message to future generations of teachers, to talented young people all across the country, to understand: this is a dream job, that this is an area where you will have more influence potentially than any other profession that you go into." President Obama then called on America's teachers to raise expectations for student success: "There's magic in those kids," he told the educators in attendance. "We just have to find it. We have to unleash it. We have to nurture it. We have to support it. We have to love them. And then we have to tell them precisely because we love you, you're going to work harder, and you're going to do better." "The things President Obama said were heartening to hear," said Evert. "We don't do our students any favors to let them off. You have to move them forward, make them believe in themselves, and give them worthwhile things to reach for."

Higher Ed Council members lead wave of no confidence votes

A nationally unprecedented series of votes of no confidence in UW System President Ray Cross and the Board of Regents, led by AFT-Wisconsin Higher Education Council and American Association of University Professors members, has spread rapidly across the UW System. The first such resolution was passed by the UW-Madison faculty senate in late April, followed quickly by faculty senates at the River Falls, La Crosse, Green Bay, and Stout campuses; by the academic staff senate at UW-Milwaukee; and by a historic, unanimous vote of the full UW-Milwaukee faculty. The UW Colleges faculty senate will take up a no confidence resolution on May 19, and AFT members at UW-Eau Claire have collected signatures from a third of their colleagues to call for a special all-faculty meeting on the resolution, the first such meeting there since 1970.

The votes are a response to the complicity of Cross and the Regents in undermining tenure, academic freedom, and shared governance, and their failure to advocate for the UW System. James Oberly, a professor of history and a member of AFT local 6481, United Faculty and Academic Staff of UW-Eau Claire, said, "After President Cross solicited presentations from each campus chancellor about the impact of the budget cuts, he interrupted them with a dime-store buzzer trinket and canceled their planned presentations to the Regents. The Board of Regents, the governor, the legislature, and all Wisconsin citizens need to know what's happening to the UW System, and if our own President won't make the case, we need a President who will."

Chad Alan Goldberg, a UW-Madison professor of sociology and the president of AFT local 223, United Faculty and Academic Staff, drafted the initial resolution. "The features of this university that have done so much to motivate me are now under attack," he wrote in the Wisconsin State Journal. "Worst of all, UW System President Ray Cross and the Board of Regents—the people who should be the university's biggest advocates—have been complicit in these attacks... As stewards of the university's academic and educational activities, the faculty have a responsibility to speak out, to educate the public about the damage being done, and to try to preserve and protect the quality of the education we strive to provide for our students and the people of this state. We are standing up for them because they deserve better."

Published by AFT-Wisconsin

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Madison, WI 53719

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