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THE FINAL WORD

Editorial: Schools wrong in skirting right to work

Michigan school districts, universities have succumbed to union pressure in signing extended contracts

As the days shorten before Michigan's new right-to-work law takes effect late this month, a growing number of school districts and public universities are doing everything in their power to circumvent it. This is not a surprising move, but it's not fair to educators who would like to opt out of their union — or to the taxpayers who fund their salaries.

The law, passed last December, ensures that union membership cannot be a condition of employment, affecting private-sector workers and most public-sector employees. But lawmakers allowed contracts settled before the law goes into effect March 28 to be exempt from right to work until they expire.

Thus the push to extend contracts protecting union security as long as possible.

Take, for instance, Warren Consolidated Schools. Last week, the school board approved an eight-year contract. Given that the previous four contracts never lasted more than three years, it's obvious what's going on here.

Michael Van Beek, education policy director at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, says this length of a contract is "totally unprecedented" in Warren.

That's true for several other districts that are scrambling to approve contracts lasting at least five years. Average contracts usually expire within three years.

Teachers unions are worried about losing members and the membership dollars that come with them. But in a time when schools are constantly complaining about lack of state funding and the hardships they face, it's odd for school and university boards to be agreeing to bargains that reach as long as a decade into the future.

The University of Michigan has reached an agreement on a

five-year contract with its 1,500 member lecturers' union, and Wayne State University officials have agreed to an eight-year contract.

Last month, the Taylor School District ratified a four-year contract with the Taylor Federation of Teachers but included a separate 10-year union dues clause that locks teachers into paying up for a decade.

That dues clause led three teachers in the school system, who want to take advantage of their new rights under right to work, to sue the district and union. The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation is representing them. These teachers say they are fighting for their freedom in the workplace.

Some Republican lawmakers are irked with this blatant maneuver around the right-to-work law.

State Rep. Tom McMillin, R-Rochester Hills, and chair of the House Oversight Committee would like some answers. He invited Taylor officials to testify before the committee, but they declined. He's also requested Wayne State administrators testify on March 12, since they will already be in Lansing for a hearing with the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education.

"In addition to it appearing to be a blatant attempt to sidestep the right-to-work law, agreeing to eight-year contracts means a decision made by school officials would extend beyond their terms of elected office," McMillin said in a statement.

Union representatives in Detroit, Utica and Dearborn are also trying to secure new collective bargaining agreements before right to work kicks in.

In the rush to preserve their strength, unions — and the education boards that go along with them — are placing their interests far above those of students, parents and taxpayers.