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Strength in numbers sought for local boards

John Audi wants to level the field for area school boards dealing with the teachers union.

It's a frequent lament among veteran school board members who have a contract settlement or two under their belts: When it comes time to negotiate with the teacher unions, it often feels like Mom & Pop's corner grocery taking on Walmart.

The board works alone, the teachers have the muscle and money of the state union. If attorney John Audi has his way, the field will start to level in Luzerne County. Audi has launched what he calls "coordinated bargaining" among five local districts. Each school board still sets its own negotiation details, but they work together on shared concerns. It's a system that Audi has already used with more than a dozen districts in northern tier counties since last spring, and at least one superintendent there feels the participating districts "benefited immensely."

"One thing you have to understand is that our district is negotiating against a very large business down in Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania State Education Association," Canton Area School District Superintendent Matt Gordon said. "They have a lot of resources at their disposal. In the past you felt kind of isolated and insulated, and it's just better to be able to have additional resources."

"We believe what this does is give districts a unified front," Audi said. "Typically, every district is faced with the PSEA, and until now each district has acted like a separate island that had to recreate the wheel for themselves. "It also keeps school districts in check, so they don't start letting the neighboring district down," Audi

added. "It basically can stop them from giving away the house, which allows the PSEA to come and say



"That district is doing this, why don't you?"

Sweet Stevens Katz & Williams Attorney John Audi at his office in Pittston.

A Moosic native with a wife from Pittston, Audi comes at this from an unusual position. Before joining the law firm of Sweet, Stevens, Katz and Williams, he worked as an attorney for PSEA. When he made the switch, co-workers at the union's regional office quipped that he was "going to the dark side," *a la* Darth Vader in the "Star Wars" movies. When Audi started hunting for appointment as solicitor to area districts, some board members privately questioned where his allegiance really lay, knowing he would be sitting on the opposite side of the table with former friends still at PSEA.

Those fears may have been allayed, at least a little, when Northwest Area School Board and teacher union agreed to a new contract last month after two years of negotiations. Audi is solicitor for the board. The contract freezes wages retroactively for those two years and makes no across-the-board wage increases through the remainder of the contract through 2016, gradually

increases teacher payments to health insurance premiums, and eliminates an early retirement



John Audi

incentive after the contract expires. Board President Randy Tomasacci and member Albert Gordon, who was heavily involved in the negotiations, said negotiations were difficult but the final outcome was favorable to the district. Ask an administrator in another local district about it, and odds are they will privately

agree.

While most of those negotiations were held before the recent forging of a five-district coordinated bargaining plan in Luzerne County - Northwest Area is one of those districts - Audi believes the deal "is illustrative. That was sort of the model. We went into negotiations with a set of goals."

How it works

Locally, Wyoming Area, Hanover Area, Greater Nanticoke Area and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit have signed on to Audi's coordinated bargaining here. The districts share the costs evenly, which Audi argues saves substantial money compared to hiring a lawyer for negotiations.

"We start by meeting with a group of administrators, usually superintendents and possibly business managers," Audi said. "We list all the issues we see that could come across the table for everyone, then prioritize them and try to narrow them as much as we can. Then we come up with model contract language that we can all agree on for those issues.

"That takes a few meetings," Audi continued. "then what I've done - and we're not at this stage in Luzerne County - is bring some board representatives together and roll out an entire package for them so that they understand the

priorities we all see, and explain the importance."

Canton Area Superintendent Matt Gordon vouched for the value of that approach. "I think the people who are negotiating on behalf of the board, our board representatives, are more informed." Gordon said. "I believe that our negotiating team has benefited immensely from the additional resources."

Audi stressed that districts participating in coordinated bargaining do not have to use him or his law firm when it comes time to sit at the bargaining table. Nor does the process develop a rigid set of proposals intended to be used in every district.

"They can bring those modeled proposals back to the person representing them," Audi said. "We're not trying to take over anybody's bargaining. It's up to the district what they want to use."

On equal terms

Audi also argues that the process can make it easier for unions to agree to terms. If all districts make it clear early on that, for example, retroactive pay is off the table once old contracts expire, "it puts the union in the position to consider that the sooner they get a contract, the better off they'll be."

In fact, Audi readily listed the core issues he finds districts quickly agree: tightening rules for tuition reimbursements when teachers take additional college classes to be sure the classes chosen provide needed skills, "columnar movement" - increased pay for increased college education - that makes sense and doesn't simply boost pay for taking any courses, health benefits and - as was the case at Northwest area, no retroactive pay increases. If enough districts stick to similar terms on those issues, Audi said, it creates greater parity in contracts for all those districts, making it harder for unions to play one district off the other. "We're trying to get rid of the parity problem," Audi said. "We really are."