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Attitudes about collective bargaining in a non-bargaining state

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by Joseph A. Sarthory and Jerry Kinnaird

As of this writing, 38 states have legislation affording public employees the capability to bargain collectively. Arkansas, typical of the deep South, is one of the remaining 12 states without such legislation. A neighboring state to the east, Tennessee, has just enacted such legislation and a neighbor to the west, Oklahoma, has had public employee collective bargaining for some years.

Arkansas is a right-to-work state and has no statutory provision for public employee meet-and-confer or collective bargaining capability. Despite the absence of such provision, many public jurisdictions in the state, local governments and school districts, do negotiate the terms and conditions of employment with employees. In no case of which the authors are aware is a master contract negotiated but the process often results in a written agreement and in some cases school board policy. Arkansas law requires that teachers be involved in the development of personnel policies and some districts utilize negotiations as a mechanism to satisfy this requirement.

Hard data are hard to come by but it is estimated that less than 10 of the close to 400 school districts in the state conduct some form of bargaining with teachers. The state's three largest districts, Little Rock, North Little Rock, and Pulaski County, do however and this has tended to restrict the practice largely to metropolitan Little Rock. External pressures from surrounding states, increased organizational efforts in the state by national teacher organizations, and the desire for collective bargaining legislation by the Arkansas Education Association all suggest continuing pressure on public employers to bargain and a likely expansion of the process in the state. Federal legislation is a possibility in the foreseeable future and there will no doubt be a continuing effort by organized labor to repeal provisions of federal labor law affording state right-to-work legislation like that in Arkansas.

It seemed appropriate against this backdrop to survey the attitudes of Arkansas educators toward collective bargaining as the process evolves and legislation is debated.

Procedures

In February 1978 a collective bargaining attitude survey instrument was mailed to 500 Arkansas educators: 100 teachers, 100 elementary principals, 100 secondary principals, 100 superintendents and 100 school board members. The teacher sample was provided by the Arkansas Education Association and was randomly selected from the AEA's computerized membership list. Tables of random numbers were utilized to select samples from the other four respondent groups. Thus, the sample is random but in no way representative of the proportion of each population in the Arkansas education community. Teachers, for instance, make up 84 percent of the total populations surveyed. Had proportional random sampling been utilized, this would have resulted in extremely small numbers of respondents from the other populations. Given limited resources to conduct the study, it was decided that equal random samples would be the best approach.

The instrument utilized was a modified version of one administered to 1600 board members and administrators at the National School Boards Association's 1976 convention. Permission was received to modify and use the instrument which was field tested prior to its use by NSBA. A stamped, addressed envelope was provided each respondent with an admonition to complete and return the instrument immediately but no later than a specified date.

Two hundred and thirty usable responses were received, a response rate of 46 percent. This rather low return is probably both a function of the researchers' inability to follow up and the import attached to collective bargaining by Arkansas educators. It is of more import to some than to others, however, as is shown in Table I.

TABLE I

Distribution of respondents

	Number	Percent of Sample	Cumulative Percent of Total Responding
Teachers	37	37%	16%
Elementary Principals	41	41%	18%
Secondary Principals	60	60%	26%
Superintendents	65	65%	28%
Board Members	27	27%	12%
Total	230	46%	100%

Findings

Respondents were asked when, in their judgment, collective bargaining will become standard practice in the nation's school districts. Responses of the total sample and of each sub sample are reported in Table II.

Table II

Collective bargaining as a future practice (Reported in Percentages)

	T*	EP*	SP*	S*	BM*	Total
Yes, in less than 2 years.	5	0	0	2	0	1
Yes, within 2-5 years	11	20	20	14	7	15
Yes, within 5-10 years	46	44	45	34	22	40
Yes, but in more than 10 years	16	20	18	23	33	20
No, some school districts will never engage in bargaining with teachers	22	17	22	27	37	24

* T = Teachers
EP = Elementary principals
SP = Secondary principals
S = Superintendents
BM = Board members

Sixty percent of respondents feel that collective bargaining as standard practice in the nation's school districts is at least five or more years away. Fully a third of board member respondents feel it is at least 10 years or more away. Almost one-fourth of respondents believe that some school districts will never engage in bargaining. Thirty-seven percent of board members believe this. Sixteen percent of the sample believe that collective bargaining will be standard practice in five years or less. Five percent of teachers feel that this will be the case in less than two years. Generally, there is a fairly high degree of agreement between teachers and administrators while board members tend to be more conservative in their estimates.

Attitudes Toward Selected Aspects of Bargaining

To assess attitudes toward selected aspects of collective bargaining, respondents were asked 15 questions about the impact of bargaining on school districts. To each question, respondents checked one of four responses: agree; tend to agree; tend to disagree; disagree. Responses of the total sample and each sub sample are reported in Table III. In the table, the four response categories have been collapsed into two—agree and disagree.

There is wide disagreement concerning whether or not bargaining will encourage allocation of funds to those services which most benefit children. Only 8 percent of superintendents and board members agree that it will while roughly 60 percent of teachers and elementary principals do. Similarly, roughly 40 percent of superintendents and board members agree that collective bargaining will result in more effective management and budgeting practices while approximately 90 percent of teachers and elementary principals do. A like alignment is evident concerning teacher living standards, public understanding of the schools, board member knowledge about school district operations and teacher organization responsiveness to the public's wishes. In all these instances, much larger percentages of teachers and elementary principals than superintendents and board members agree that collective bargaining will encourage rather than retard. In some cases, secondary principals are somewhere between the attitudes of their elementary counterparts and teachers on the one hand and board members and superintendents on the other.

There is wide agreement among all groups on some items. Majorities in each group agree that collective bargaining will cause boards and teachers to decide matters which have traditionally been decided by administrators. Seventy-five percent of the teachers responding feel this way as compared with 63 percent of the total sample. Similarly, majorities agree that collective bargaining will prompt growth of citizen groups who lobby both the board and teachers for the benefit of children. Likewise, majorities believe that the process will reduce the decision-making authority of school boards. Finally, majorities in each respondent group agree that the frequency of teacher strikes will increase as a result of collective bargaining. It is interesting that 2/3 of responding teachers believe this to be the case.

Interesting response patterns appear on some other items. Three-fourths of responding superintendents and board members agree that bargaining will diminish the authority of administrators. A slight majority of principals feel this way. Strangely, a majority of teachers disagree. Roughly the same pattern appears relative to the likelihood of collective bargaining increasing the local tax burden on citizens. Slight majorities of professional educators believe that local district bargaining will be replaced by bargaining at the regional or state level while a slight majority of board members disagree. Large majorities of educators agree that school boards will take a more aggressive role in planning, goal setting, priority setting and the like. Among school board members a slight majority disagrees. Finally, large majorities of superintendents and board members agree that bargaining will force a disproportionate share of school funds into salaries and benefits. Four-fifths of teacher respondents disagree while principals are undecided on this issue.

Some generalizations appear supportable on the basis of data in Table III.

1. Items on which there is wide agreement among teachers, administrators and board members have to do with shifts in power and decision-making authority as a result of collective bargaining.

2. Items on which there is wide disagreement among teachers, administrators and board members have to do with resource allocation priorities and degree of understanding of school district operations as a result of collective bargaining.

3. Items on which no consistent response pattern emerges have to do with the locus of bargaining, revenue sources to support bargaining agreements and the impact on teacher salaries and benefits.

4. Generally, attitudes of board members and superintendents are similar; those of teachers and elementary principals are similar; attitudes of secondary principals are somewhere in between and less consistent.

The Superintendent's Role in Collective Bargaining

Respondents were asked "In your judgment, what should be the role of the superintendent during collective bargaining?" Responses of the total sample and of each sub sample are reported in Table IV.

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Table III

Attitudes toward collective bargaining (Reported in Percentages)

	T		EP		SP		S		BM		TOTAL	
	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D
1. Collective bargaining will encourage allocation of funds to those services which most benefit children.	67	33	56	44	32	68	8	92	8	92	33	67
2. Collective bargaining will cause boards and teachers to decide matters (such as teacher promotion) which traditionally have been decided by administrators.	75	25	53	47	76	33	59	41	59	41	63	37
3. Collective bargaining will force school districts to adopt more effective management and budgeting practices.	92	8	90	10	74	26	41	59	45	55	76	33
4. Collective bargaining will result in a better standard of living for teachers.	97	3	78	22	74	26	55	45	45	55	69	31
5. Collective bargaining will result in better public understanding of school district operation.	65	35	60	40	38	62	19	81	15	85	38	62
6. Collective bargaining will prompt growth of citizen groups who "lobby" both the board and teacher organizations for the benefit of children.	52	48	60	40	57	43	45	55	49	51	52	48
7. Collective bargaining will cause board members to be better informed about school district operations.	87	13	78	22	74	26	50	50	48	52	67	33
8. Collective bargaining will cause reduction in the decision-making authority of school boards.	60	40	63	37	55	45	74	26	63	37	63	37
9. Collective bargaining will tend to diminish the authority of school administrators over school affairs.	43	57	61	39	51	49	76	24	77	23	63	37
10. Collective bargaining will increase the local tax burden on citizens.	49	51	70	30	67	33	86	14	81	19	71	29
11. Collective bargaining will cause school boards to take a more aggressive role in planning, goal setting, priority setting, and the like.	94	6	71	29	83	17	75	25	46	54	76	24
12. Collective bargaining will prompt teacher organizations to be more responsive to the public's wishes.	68	32	46	54	40	60	14	86	23	77	36	64
13. Collective bargaining by each school district will be replaced by bargaining at the regional or state level.	43	57	46	54	43	57	47	53	57	43	47	53
14. Collective bargaining will make teacher strikes more frequent than if there were no bargaining at all.	65	35	80	20	76	24	86	14	89	11	79	21
15. Collective bargaining will force a disproportionate share of school funds into salaries and benefits.	21	79	49	51	55	45	83	17	89	11	61	39

TABLE IV

Role of the Superintendent (Reported in Percentages)

	T	EP	SP	S	BM	TOTAL
1. The superintendent should not be involved in the process.	4	4	11	5	5	6
2. The superintendent should be neutral, an information resources to both sides, supporting neither.	53	36	18	18	18	27
3. The superintendent should support and advise the board, but not sit at the table.	2	17	26	25	11	19
4. The superintendent should sit at the table as a member of the board's negotiating team.	27	30	22	32	34	28
5. The superintendent should be the board's chief negotiator.	11	11	21	19	29	18
6. Other	3	2	2	1	3	2
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

There are wide discrepancies within and among respondent groups as to the role of the superintendent. Slightly more than half of responding superintendents feel that they should be on the board team—20 percent suggest as the chief negotiator. Fully a fourth believe that the superintendent should advise and support the board but not be at the table. Only 5 percent feel that superintendents should not be involved. The response pattern among board members is similar except that 63 percent feel that superintendents should be on the board team and a smaller number feel their role should be merely a behind the scenes adviser to the board.

A majority of teachers believe that the superintendent should be neutral, giving information to both sides while supporting neither. Fully another 38 percent feel that the superintendent should be on the board team however.

Elementary and secondary principals are fairly together on this item. Approximately 40 percent of both groups feel that the superintendent should be on the board's negotiating team. Twice the number of elementary principals as secondary principals—36 percent to 18 percent—feel that the superintendent should be neutral however.

The Principal's Role in Collective Bargaining

A most important dimension of collective bargaining is the role of the principal in the process. Respondents were asked "In your judgment, what should be the role of the school principal during collective bargaining?" Responses appear in Table V.

Almost half of the respondents feel that the principal should either not be involved in the collective bargaining process or should be neutral. But 51 percent feel that the principal should be involved either on the board or teacher side. This variance of opinion is reflected within and among the respondent groups.

A majority of elementary principals feel that the principal should be neutral, an information source to both sides, supporting neither. Another 28 percent feel that the principal should either advise and support the board team or be on it. On the other hand, only 28 percent of secondary principals feel they should be neutral. Fully a quarter of this group believe that secondary principals should advise the board. But a significant 14 percent feel that they should support and advise teachers on their bargaining position. Small numbers of both elementary and secondary principals feel that principals should be on the teacher negotiating team. Many responses to "other" indicated that principals should have their own unit and bargain with the board.

A solid minority of teachers feel that principals should not be involved or should be neutral. Slightly more than a fifth believe that principals should advise and support teachers in bargaining. Sixteen percent suggest that principals should be on the teacher negotiating team.

Superintendents and board members are fairly together on this item although 36 percent of the former and only 24 percent of the latter feel that principals should be neutral. Approximately a fifth of both groups believe that principals should advise and support the board but not be at the table. Eighteen percent of both groups indicate that principals should be on the board negotiating team.

Public Involvement in Collective Bargaining

A controversial issue in collective bargaining is the extent to which the public should be involved in the process. Respondents were asked "In what ways, if any, do you think the public should be involved in the collective bargaining process?" Responses are reported in Table VI.

There is a high degree of between group agreement on this item. Thirty-eight percent of the total sample feel that the board is the public's representative and that no additional public involvement should be afforded. This proportion is consistent among all groups except in the case of elementary principals. Only 28 percent of this group believe that there should be no additional public involvement.

A slightly smaller minority feel that bargaining sessions should be open to press and public. Only 20 percent of secondary principals believe this should be the case however. A larger percentage of them suggest that the board should hold hearings in advance of the bargaining process.

Slightly more than a fifth of the sample feel that boards should hold a hearing prior to bargaining or that representatives of citizen groups should be a third party at the table. A very small percentage of respondents believe that the final agreement should be subject to a public referendum.

TABLE V

Role of the Principal (Reported in Percentages)

	T	EP	SP	S	BM	TOTAL
1. A principal should not be involved in the process.	11	6	16	19	11	14
2. A principal should be neutral, an information resource to both sides, supporting neither.	33	51	28	36	24	34
3. A principal should support and advise the board, but not sit at the table.	11	14	26	16	24	19
4. A principal should support and advise teachers on their bargaining position.	22	6	14	7	13	12
5. A principal should be a member of the board's negotiating team.	4	14	6	18	18	12
6. A principal should be a member of the teachers' negotiating team.	16	8	7	4	8	8
7. Other	3	1	3	0	2	1
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

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TABLE VI

Role of the Public (Reported in Percentages)

	T	EP	SP	S	BM	TOTAL
1. No involvement; the board is the public's representative.	41	28	41	36	44	38
2. The board should hold hearings in advance of the bargaining process.	12	13	22	14	14	14
3. Negotiation sessions should be open to press and public scrutiny.	39	42	30	40	36	35
4. Representatives of citizen groups should be a third party at the table.	6	11	10	6	3	8
5. The final agreement should be subject to a public referendum.	0	6	5	4	3	4
6. Other	2	0	2	0	0	1
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

TABLE VII

Collective bargaining law scope and strike provisions (Reported in Percentages)

	T	EP	SP	S	BM	TOTAL
1. Limiting the scope of bargaining to finance items (e.g., wages, hours)	5	11	17	38	13	19
2. Establishing a broad scope of items that are subject to bargaining	53	36	37	6	3	27
3. Outlawing the right of teachers to strike	8	9	6	36	50	20
4. Affirming the right of teachers to strike	11	0	2	0	0	2
5. Compulsory arbitration, instead of a strike	23	44	35	19	31	30
6. Other	0	0	3	1	3	2
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

TABLE VIII

Educational influences at the state level (Reported in Percentages)

	T	EP	SP	S	BM	TOTAL
1. State teacher organizations	32	31	28	30	27	29
2. State school boards association	13	15	14	25	17	18
3. State PTA	1	6	3	0	3	3
4. State administrator associations	9	13	16	19	8	14
5. State and federal courts	20	13	16	10	19	15
6. State Superintendent of Education	5	9	6	5	4	5
7. State Board of Education	19	12	16	10	19	15
8. Other	1	1	1	1	3	1
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Collective Bargaining Law Provisions

Crucial to collective bargaining are statutory provisions within which the process takes place. Important elements of such legislation are scope and strike provisions. Respondents were asked "Please check which **one** of the following would be your highest priority in a collective bargaining law." Responses appear in Table VII.

As might be expected there is a divergent pattern of responses to this item. A majority of teachers feel that a broad scope of items should be subject to bargaining. Only 6 and 3 percent, respectively, of superintendents and board members agree. On the other hand, approximately a third of principals responding do agree. Fifty percent of board members would prohibit strikes as would a third of the superintendents. Less than 10 percent of teachers and principals would outlaw the strike as a tactic. Significant numbers of respondents—ranging from 19 percent to 44 percent of each sub sample—would legislate compulsory arbitration as opposed to a strike provision. Principals and board members are more supportive of this legislative provision than are teachers and superintendents.

Educational Influences at the State Level

The substance of Arkansas public sector collective bargaining legislation will be partially a function of the relative clout wielded by educational interest groups and institutions. To assess perceived degrees of clout respondents were asked "When it comes to influencing **state**

legislation affecting education which three of the following would you identify as having the most influence?" Responses are reported in Table VIII.

There is fairly wide agreement that state teacher organizations exert the most influence on state educational legislation. Roughly 30 percent of all respondent groups believe this. The next most influential group is perceived as being the state school boards association. Eighteen percent of the total sample feel this is the case. Interestingly, 25 percent of superintendents ascribe more clout to the school boards association than do the other respondent groups. Almost equal amounts of clout are ascribed to state administrator associations, state and federal courts and the state board of education. Generally, administrators credit their associations with more clout than do teachers and board members. Conversely, teachers and board members perceive more influence wielded by courts and the state board than do administrators.

Conclusions

Some broad, general conclusions about collective bargaining in Arkansas evolve from the findings reported above. The most salient of these conclusions follow.

1. There is a wide divergence of attitudes toward collective bargaining among Arkansas educators. Aspects of collective bargaining around which this divergence is manifested include:
   - Time estimates as to the onset of collective bargaining as standard practice.
   - The impact of collective bargaining on:
     - school district resource allocations
     - school district management and budgeting practices
     - teacher living standards
     - public understanding of the schools
     - board member knowledge of district operations
     - responsiveness of teacher organizations to the public's wishes
     - the authority level of administrators
     - the local tax burden
     - the board's role in planning, goal setting, and priority setting
   - The role of the superintendent.
   - The role of the principal.
   - Statutory scope and strike provisions.
2. The level of interest in collective bargaining is rather low. This is evidenced by a 46 percent overall response rate and significantly lower response rates among teachers, elementary principals, and school board members.
3. Levels of knowledge and understanding of collective bargaining are rather low. This is evidenced by comparing responses in this survey to generally recognized good collective bargaining practice around the nation.
4. There is potential for increasing within and between group conflict as collective bargaining gathers momentum in the state.
5. There is some receptivity to allowing outside third parties to influence substantively local bargaining agreements.
6. There is a feeling that educators can influence the substance of any state collective bargaining legislation.

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