

Collective Bargaining In Public Education



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Collective bargaining is give-and-take discussion between an employer and an organization that represents employees — a union — with the intent of reaching a contractual agreement.

When did collective bargaining start?

The National Labor Relations Act, first passed in 1935, guarantees the right of private sector employees to organize and collectively bargain. In 1959, Wisconsin extended that right to public employees — the first state to do so. The nation’s first collectively bargained agreement with public school teachers was signed in 1962 in New York City.

How widespread is it?

Thirty-four states and Washington, DC, explicitly allow collective bargaining for teachers and often for education support professionals and higher education faculty as well. Although 16 states do not have collective bargaining statutes, in most of those states limited bargaining takes place for some or all categories of education employees.

What are the benefits?

Collective bargaining gives educators a voice in their workplace. It helps assure fair wages and benefits, and create better teaching and learning conditions. That means everyone connected to the school — students, teachers, education support professionals, administrators, and taxpayers — benefits from it. Specifically, collective bargaining:

- ▶ **Improves teaching and learning.** Teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions, so by addressing school and classroom issues, everyone gains. Unions routinely negotiate provisions to improve student learning where educators and employers are allowed to collaborate on issues that go beyond a limited scope of salary, benefits, and working conditions — for example, setting limits on class size, specifying time for teachers to share effective classroom practices, addressing school building health and safety issues, and more.
- ▶ **Gives professional educators a genuine voice.** The entire school community can benefit from educators’ ideas and expertise. Bargaining ensures that career education employees have a respected voice in the workplace and are involved in both identifying and solving school and classroom issues, which in turn promotes student learning. Through union representatives, front-line educators are given a meaningful say in such issues as the availability of needed resources, engaging in restorative practices, professional development, teacher-to-teacher peer assistance, and worksite health and safety.
- ▶ **Ensures fair employment procedures.** A bargained contract ensures that employees are treated fairly because both parties have discussed and agreed upon rules and procedures for the workplace. Contracts may also set forth procedures and principles for teacher evaluations that are comprehensive, meaningful, fair, and lead to improved teacher practice and student learning. Employees and managers understand what steps will be used to resolve employee grievances, lay off workers, or settle disputes.