

Chief Negotiator Interview

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“We are all equal when sitting at the table”, said Mr. Garth Merlino during our chief negotiator interview (G. Merlino, personal communication, March 27, 2025). When Mr. Merlino stated this, he was referring to the Union and the District at the negotiation meetings from the 2018 and 2022 contract negotiations from EPEA and Erie 1 BOCES. Mr. Merlino is the Electrical Systems Instructor at the Harkness Career Center and the Vice President of our Teacher’s Union. He was chief negotiator for the Labor side in each of our last two contract negotiations. I have not thought of contract negotiations as Labor being equal to the District. His educational leadership through being the VP of our teacher’s union proved to be professional from the moment we began discussing the how and the why of negotiations.

In Chapter 9 of Human Resources in Administration in Education, by Ronald W. Rebore, it states “negotiating is an art rather than a science.” (Rebore, 2015, p. 314) Through my interview with Mr. Merlino this thought kept repeating itself in my mind. Working with people, communicating with people, and forming connections with people all for the better good of students is an art form. Both sides are passionate about what they stand for but each other needs to listen, stay calm and flexible to be able to communicate with the other side in an understanding way. Being part of the EPEA teacher’s union during the last two contract negotiations and not being privy to what the negotiators were fighting for, this interview helped me see a different side. Mr. Merlino was passionate about sharing with me his thoughts and the experience of having a seat at the table with the educational lawyer and the District’s lead negotiators. As he described the big picture of the amount of money they had to work with and where this money would be allocated visually created a puzzle in my brain with pieces moving around trying to fit. I have always thought of myself as a non-competitive person, however,

observing my friend and colleague of 15 years describe to me how the Labor negotiations team fought for our wants and needs ignited a passion in his eyes that I know I have for my students when they are in need of support and or assistance. I know I have this sort of fight or competitive side to me when I am doing the right thing for a collective group.

Our contract negotiations 6 years ago opened up the entire contract to clear up outdated verbiage along with negotiating the norm of salary, wages, time off and the like. Where as two years ago that negotiation included 5 topics voted on by teachers as being hot topics. We talked about the extreme differences between the two different negotiations. While he said opening up the entire contract took an incredible amount of time, the actual negotiations were simple. The District and Labor sides immediately saw eye to eye on key factors and had that portion settled quickly, but the line by line cleaning up of the verbiage from the 1980s took months on end with the committees meeting once a week sometimes twice. There was more “fight” when the negotiations focused on the five key topics four years later. This reminded me of when we rewrite curriculum or when as teachers, we are asked learn new strategies under new administration teams with leadership platforms that are more updated than those of when veteran teachers were first hired. Throughout the courses at UB LIFTS I have noted often that as leaders, we are teaching or guiding teachers toward their strengths for the good of the students. As teachers, our goal is to guide students to find their strengths and grow as individuals. Following the PESEL standards 2, 7, and 9 (Appendix A) emphasized in this assignment, it is easy to see how the education students receive is at the forefront of negotiations that clearly take care of the teacher who takes care of the students. Through our educational communities, leaders stand out among us without administrative titles. Mr. Merlino is a true leader in our

Teacher's Union representing what is right for educators helping us to refine a contract for the times that focuses on what teachers need to be content in their position. I see him and the other negotiators differently now. While I have always respected him as an educator, after talking with him, I see how he is a great leader of his coworkers representing us at the table of compensation for what we do daily.

Part of my leadership platform for UB LIFTS focuses on recruiting and keeping new teachers in the CTE field. Mr. Merlino and I talked during our interview about how contract negotiations help set the stage for enticing applicants to be interested in working for a CTE center. To entice tradesmen to leave high hourly paid positions to become a teacher that trains the next generation of tradesmen, raising the lower steps of the salary schedule or talking the district in to hiring higher than step five is necessary. Also, a solid benefits package that makes a difference in young family's day to day life is essential. Talking with a colleague on this subject had me brainstorming about hiring bonuses and trades discounts for services amongst our teachers as added incentives to recruit teachers in the trades. Closing the skills gap has been a passion of mine honestly since my young sons watch "Dirty Jobs" back in the early 2000's. We need plumbers, electricians, nurses, mechanics and so on to do the tasks many do not want to or cannot do. Finding teachers and keeping teachers in trades positions should be a focus of our teacher contract. While veteran teachers also deserve retirement incentives, new hires deserve enticements to join an educational community from a trades industry. This part of our interview helped validate parts of my leadership platform that my philosophies are current and deserve the focus of educational leaders to support new hires not only through mentoring and new teacher focus groups but also through contract negotiations.

After experiencing this assignment and communicating with a colleague on subjects we have not spoken of before one on one, I decided to nominate myself to be a Union representative in my building. This course has inspired me to get more involved in the human relations of an educational community. Starting as a Union representative seems like the next step to gain experience from both sides of the table. We often hear sayings like “you would not believe what I can’t share” or “if these walls could talk”, becoming a Union Representative I believe will give me the experience toward being part of an administrative team in the future by allowing me to experience of having a seat at the table when Administration manages teachers who have misstepped.

As stated in Rebore Chapter 9, “Negotiation is a way of life” (Rebore, 2015, p. 315). Being flexible and respecting your adversary while remaining calm and listening are tools to assist in contract talks. Professionalism is key to give and take from both sides of the table. Patience is needed when two different sides of the argument want to be heard to push their agenda through. However, just as Mr. Merlino said during our interview when the Labor side and the District side sit at the table together for contract negotiations, “We are all equal when sitting at the table”. He went on to say the college degrees, years of working in your career, how much money they make vs. us did not matter. The negotiators were all there for a common goal, figuring out the give and the take for the best educational community for our students. That had a profound effect on me and will stick with me through my leadership journey.

Appendix A

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

2. Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
7. Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
9. Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being

Worked Cited

Rebore, R, 2015, *Human Resources Administration in Education*, 10th edition, Pearson.