

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Governor pits teachers vs. property taxpayers

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The seething furor over Act 10 is making a ferocious comeback. Gov. Scott Walker is doing his version of Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry. He is in essence telling the Madison School District, "Go ahead, make my day."

That is because Madison schools risk losing \$16 million in state funding unless the district follows the rules under Act 10. The state law requires public employees to pay for 12 percent of the cost of their health insurance and half the cost of their retirement contributions.

If the Madison School Board does not make the change, the district will be left out of the funding increase of \$200 per student in the first year of the next state budget, and \$404 in the second year. That comes to \$16 million the district would not receive. The day after Gov. Walker's speech, I promptly heard from steamed callers on my webcast talk show. One Madison parent of two school age youngsters said, "Walker is acting like a petulant child. The teachers can't spend their health insurance."

"Let them steam," said Mike Mikalsen, a veteran legislative staffer who serves as chief of staff for Republican state Sen. Steven Nass, R-Whitewater. "We are not going to keep pouring money into Madison just because they think they are superior."

Instead of paying 12 percent of the cost of their health insurance, Madison School District employees contribute from 1.5 percent for lower-paid staff to 10 percent for school district administrators. Longtime School Board member Ed Hughes says the board's approach to employee contributions to health care costs have been supported by the community. Conservative Madison activist David Blaska sued in Dane County Court to force the Madison School District to obey Act 10. But the court ruled Blaska did not have legal standing to sue.

If the governor gets his way now, school districts will be made to certify compliance with Act 10 with the Department of Public Instruction before receiving the state funding. Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison, said the governor is forcing the Madison district to "not adequately compensate our teachers, not adequately give them benefits." But the outspoken Mikalsen takes aim at Madison school officials, "They have failed to prioritize

children. They have failed to prioritize property taxpayers. The state is stepping in to say enough."

School Board member Hughes says, "I'm proud of the collaborative working relationship we've forged with our teachers that has delivered balanced budgets, kept a lid on health insurance costs and earned strong community support."

Hughes adds, "We'll persist and keep working together no matter what Governor Walker throws at us."

Supporters of the Madison way say it allows the school district to attract talented teachers. School Board member T.J. Mertz says, "The combination of salary and benefits in the compensation package is one way districts can position themselves in the market."

The fiery Mikalsen goes for the jugular.

"Some will say don't take the money," he said. "Then they don't care about kids."

Fighting words, to be sure. An opponent of Walker's plan and a Madison caller to my show said "they hate us so much, why do they give a crap about what we do with our kids or what we do with our schools?"

Monona Grove School Board Member Jeff Simpson rushed to the defense of Madison schools when he asked a question of citizens in that district: "Do you want to get the best teachers here, or do you want them to go to Minnesota?"

In fact, the state has control over how local public schools are funded even though it hasn't really sought to enforce Act 10 until now. The debate pits Madison property taxpayers against teachers like we've never seen. No matter what the School Board does, the governor can use the issue in his next campaign.

My bet is the Madison School Board will defy the governor and go its own way. Emotions are simply running too high.

Mitch is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic. The Mitch Henck Show is broadcast live 8-11a.m. Monday-Friday at www.madisontalks.com.

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