

Teachers union bargaining pillars support our community



Clinton McCracken

Strong public schools make for strong communities. Parents in Orange County understand this well which is why poll after poll shows support for public school teachers and that an overwhelming number of parents agree Florida's public schools should be the strongest in the nation.

Meeting that ambitious goal is not only possible, it is also the driving force behind the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association (OCCTA). As our union works to strengthen the teaching profession and our schools, we know that doing so will also strengthen Orange County as a whole. Specifically, we are focused on three bargaining pillars to accomplish this goal: invest in educators and students, support our families, and respect for educators.

It is shameful that Florida ranks 50th in the nation in average teacher pay. To combat this, we must come together as a community and demand better. The teacher raises that were secured in last year's contract negotiations are a step in the right direction. But our educators

need to see additional meaningful raises so those who teach in Orange County can afford to live here without having to take on a second or third job. This also means the elected representatives on the Orange County School Board need to be vocal and stand up to misinformation and disinformation put out by Gov. Ron DeSantis and his allies whenever they try to downplay or deflect from the impacts of Florida's teachers being among the worst paid in the nation. When educators, parents, and our locally elected officials stand together, we will have the power we need to force Tallahassee to pay attention. Locally, the OCPS School Board should prioritize the well-being of its employees when setting the district budget. An organization's budget reflects its values, and our teachers are struggling to afford to pay their bills on their salaries and many are leaving the profession because of this.

When it comes to addressing the teacher shortage, the solution is not really all that hard. Beyond increasing pay, there are simple policies that will make Orange County Public Schools an attractive place to work. For example, all working people deserve paid parental leave. It is what is

best for newborns and adopted children. It is what is best for new parents, and it is what is best for entire communities. As one of the largest employers in Orange County, our school district should set the standard. In addition to paid parental leave, we are advocating for pumping and breast-milk storage rights for new moms when they do return to work. We are also proposing paid bereavement leave which isn't currently available in OCPS. Having the strongest schools in the nation means passing policies that strengthen and respect families.

While OCCTA members and leaders will never agree with the elected school board members on every decision, we recognize that having the strong schools every child in Orange County deserves means the adults are working together for a common goal. We are committed to a positive working relationship and believe the leadership of OCPS is as well. They can demonstrate this commitment by working with us to create a labor-management partnership committee. This committee would address other working condition issues such as workload, class size, grading, affordable housing for educators, enhancing issues of school culture and administration and

other proposals that demonstrate respect for teacher's voices.

It's not enough to tell teachers they are respected, that respect must be put into practice by listening to and acting upon our concerns, hopes and aspirations. As the ones who know the students by name, we are best positioned to offer solutions on how to meet their needs.

Public education in Florida is at a crossroads. As we wrap up this school year and head into the 2024-25 school year, we do so knowing the choices that are made now will impact not just teachers, students and parents but the entire community. And these impacts will be felt for decades to come. That is why it is so important that we get things right. For all of those who believe like we do that Orange County's children deserve nothing but the best, we encourage you to join with us in our mission to invest in educators and students, support our families and respect our educators.

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