

Using Power and Creating Leverage

Preparing for negotiations includes many important steps: building a solid bargaining team, doing research, drafting proposals, communicating with members, and others. One of the most critical steps in preparing to go to the table is understanding the existing balance of power between the union and district, and creating a plan to ensure that it favors our members. When we use our power to leverage a settlement, it means we use our assets to move the other side to act in a way that we want.

What is power?

Power is a word that has a negative connotation for many people. The most common quote people associate with power is “power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In reality, power is simply defined as **the ability to act**. When we are powerful, it means we have the ability to achieve our goals.

Power comes from two main sources:

- **Organized money:** revenue and other financial resources allow unions and districts to exert power by controlling a budget, using resources to pay for public messages, and financing events and actions that put pressure on the other side.
- **Organized people:** significant numbers people, actively pursuing a common strategy to meet and end goal. Examples include unification actions such as attending and speaking at board meetings, petition drives, and engaging allies to speak on our behalf.

Our most significant source of power is our numbers. In a negotiations setting, there are, in almost all cases, more union members than there are employer representatives; our power derives from our members acting together in support of the team to achieve bargaining goals.

What does this mean for bargaining teams?

Using our power at the table means more than being prepared and being right about the facts on the table. Our ability to leverage a settlement means that we have to make it difficult for the employer to make a decision other than the one we want, and to use our power of numbers to overcome their power of the purse. To do that, employers need to feel pressured. Too often, bargaining team members are perceived by the district as being isolated cases and not speaking for the entire unit. Bargaining teams can overcome this perception, and the district’s financial power, by:

1. Identify our most important assets that could provide us with leverage.
2. Use these assets to create pressure on the employer.

www.educationminnesota.org

Education Minnesota is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and AFL-CIO.

Updated October 2014



Consider the following examples:

Assets/source of leverage

The school district has a significant, growing fund balance and can afford a reasonable settlement.

Members are united in support of a bargaining goal to limit special education caseload to state guidelines.

The union has won a series of grievances over leave language in the contract that needs to be corrected during bargaining.

Members are unwilling to settle the contract without a settlement at least as good as the state average.

Action to demonstrate power

Share information with members about the district's ability to pay and ask them to call board members on the same day to request a reasonable settlement.

All special education teachers and ESP speak at a board meeting about the impact of current caseload on student learning and working conditions.

All members who were part of the grievances present the corrective language proposal at a bargaining session, sharing a personal story about the importance of correcting the problem.

A member and parent delegation presents a petition citing the new revenue from the state and the settlements of surrounding districts to the superintendent calling for an agreement that provides compensation that is competitive within the area.

