

How Well Do You Know Your Union Contract?

As a union, we work together to fight for great public schools for every student, regardless of zip code. By using our collective voice and the power of bargaining, we win higher wages, and improved benefits and working conditions so that our members can focus on supporting students, instead of worrying about paying bills or confronting soaring medical costs. Your union also negotiates for better teaching and learning conditions so that everyone connected to the school – students and parents as well as all educators – benefits.

What is Collective Bargaining?

Collective bargaining is a process in which your association and your employer exchange ideas, mutually solve problems, and reach a written agreement – the collective bargaining agreement (often referred to as the “contract” or “CBA”). Read your contract, become familiar with it, and then seek out your association/building representative, local president, or UniServ representative if you have any questions. Attend your local association meetings so you can learn more about your rights and how your association can help you – both in and out of the classroom.

Here are key provisions that new educators ask about the most...

Association Rights

The contract contains several provisions that describe how the association operates and protects your rights. It contains a formal dispute process, usually called a grievance procedure. It also explains your due process protections. This section also includes how your association communicates with you about school district policy changes and activities, and association events (e.g., bulletin boards on site, email, union meetings).

Salary, Benefits, and Working Conditions

Your association negotiates to improve your economic security and working conditions at school so that you focus on your students.

Salary: Your union negotiates your salary increases for the duration of the contract. Most contracts include a salary schedule, which spells out your current salary, and describes how and when you will earn more. Increases are typically based on an overall increase to the entire salary schedule (typically called a “cost of living adjustment” or “COLA”) or “moving up” a step or “across a lane” based on experience or earning continuing education credits or certifications, respectively. Sometimes, you receive additional stipends for working in high poverty schools or for taking on additional responsibilities.

Medical, dental, and vision benefits: You’ll find details on plan offerings, your costs, employer contributions, eligibility, and more.

Retirement security: Retirement may not seem like an immediate concern as you start your career but our union believes you should retire with dignity. For most career educators, your retirement benefit is the largest financial asset you will ever own. This provision describes the characteristics of pension plans – what your contributions and benefits are or can be, and other details – and supplemental retirement accounts, such as 403(b) plans.

Leave benefits: You are entitled to different types of leave such as medical, personal, bereavement, and family leave. Learn how you accrue these benefits (Do you have a pool of days at the beginning of the school year or do you accrue time as the year goes on?) and how you apply for the different types.

Working conditions: Your contract contains many provisions that improve your working and your students' learning conditions, such as class size, healthy and safe buildings, supply stipends, among others. The contract also specifies your daily hours of work including any breaks, and the number of days in your work year.

Student loan repayment: Many associations have negotiated policies to help you offset your student loans. You should review your school district's existing policies to ensure you are taking advantage of the opportunity.

Professional Learning

Comprehensive professional learning is important for all educators, but it is particularly vital for new educators. Investing in yourself as an educator is the best way to ensure both career growth and enhanced student learning.

Induction and mentoring/peer assistance: Hopefully, your school district has an induction/mentoring program, so an experienced peer can meet with and coach you about classroom management, curriculum development, parent communications, and other issues. If your school does not have a formal mentoring program, seek out your building representative to introduce you to an experienced teacher in your school.

Evaluation: Your school district will have some type of evaluation system in place. Learn more about the criteria and timing of the evaluation, as well as your rights.

Planning/collaboration time: All educators, especially those new to the profession, need adequate time to collaborate and reflect with colleagues so you can grow professionally and improve your practice.



Educational/knowledge/skill improvement: Your school district should provide time, financial reimbursement, and other types of support for you to acquire more education and skills to improve your practice.

Learn more about the union advantage

nea.org/union