



Celestino “Tino” Lopez McAllen AFT Retiree

Remembering the Promise



Whether it was working to keep the lights on for the students in McAllen ISD schools or updating circuit boards to provide new power for teacher lounges using microwave ovens, Celestino “Tino” Lopez worked as a journeyman for 22 years ensuring everything electrical in the district worked properly.

“When I first started working for the district,” said Tino, “everything was simple. You would report to work, receive a work order, pick up the part, and then go do the job. Now, everything is much more complicated. The district has a multi-million dollar warehouse stocked with equipment and parts. You receive a work order and then take it to another person who scans it into a computer to be entered as inventory. If the part is not in stock, you have to go to another person to create an invoice, then a purchase order, wait until the part is available, and do everything again. The process of getting the part you need to do the work order passes through so many hands now that the \$12 ballast for a light fixture actually costs about \$20 because there are more people working to issue the part you once requested and signed for. I guess that’s progress.”

While an employee of the district, Tino served as the spokesperson for his co-workers sitting on a district committee, bringing attention to issues affecting maintenance workers. “We’d meet about once a month to discuss concerns, but nothing ever came from those meetings,” Tino recalls. Now as a retiree, he works as a private contractor but still supports his former co-workers to improve job safety and working conditions. “The number one issue affecting many maintenance employees in McAllen ISD today is the district’s decision to reduce the number of work days from 260 days to 242 days. This started about three years ago. At first only a certain number of employees were affected, but now the district wants to move all 260 day employees to 242 days,” says Tino. “That explains why it’s difficult to hire new employees and why others have chosen to leave McAllen ISD to work for neighboring districts that have the 260 day work schedule,” explains Tino. He is presently helping maintenance workers with a petition by walking door-to-door in neighborhoods to educate the community about the economic hardship the district’s decision is having on employees.

“My friends need to join the AFT,” urges Tino. We tried to make things better on our own, but that didn’t work. I joined the McAllen American Federation of Teachers (AFT) as a retiree after hearing what they had done for other school employees. I wish I had joined when I worked for the district. The district restricts AFT access to the maintenance employees, so it makes it harder to join. Now I’m trying to get my friends to become members so they can get the help and support they need before they lose more of what they have. They’ve already lost 5 vacation days, and now they are losing 18 workdays out of the year. I remember when McAllen ISD was the premier district in the Valley where everyone wanted to work. If you were privileged to have a job as a maintenance worker, you were promised five days of paid vacation and 260 days of work. That’s changed. I think McAllen ISD can do better.”

(over)



Maintenance Employees

vs.



Jack of all Trades

We need to ensure our children attend schools that are wired properly by certified journeyman, not “building managers” who are expected to perform tasks for which they are not skilled. Where the district once employed nine electricians, there are now five. Where we once had three welders, we now have one. Reducing the number of qualified employees and reducing their salaries is penny wise and pound foolish. How can we expect our schools to remain clean and properly maintained with fewer employees?

Support our efforts to ensure McAllen ISD pays maintenance employees a living wage by employing them 260 days a year as opposed to reducing their work days to 242. The district should also restore these employees’ five day vacation so that we remain competitive with other districts and stop the exodus of employees to find work in neighboring school districts.

Our schools need to be properly staffed by custodians so that our students have clean and sanitary buildings. We also need to ensure an optimum number of qualified electricians, plumbers, and other maintenance workers are employed to keep our schools safe. The work should be done by qualified employees, not a “jack of all trades” **building manager** who has no expertise in every area. The safety of our children and the safety of employees should come first. Last school year, an HVAC employee was seriously injured and nearly electrocuted while attempting to do the work once done by an electrician.

You can help improve the condition of our schools by letting our school board members know we need to pay our maintenance employees, at minimum, what they were paid before the district decided to cut their salaries and benefits in order to save money. The fact is administrators’ salaries have continued to increase while maintenance employees’ salaries and benefits have steadily decreased. This is wrong! Let’s put our money where it does the most good--with the people who maintain our children’s schools. Send an e-mail to your school board members asking them to do the right thing.

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