

School Board postpones vote on teachers contract

Written by Mark Jaeger
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Uncertainty about changing labor scene in Madison prompts delay

A proposed two-year agreement between the Northern Ozaukee School Board and the teachers' union was stymied Monday by the changing labor sentiment in Madison ushered in by Gov. Scott Walker.

Teachers in the Fredonia Education Association have been working for the past year without a contract.

After ongoing talks between union representatives and the Negotiations Committee, a tentative agreement was proposed that included a frozen salary schedule for last year and this year.

Although the committee and administration initially recommended the board back the agreement, the district's legal counsel suggested officials hold off on taking action on the pact until the air clears in Madison.

Since taking office in January along with a Republican-controlled Legislature, Walker has indicated that sweeping changes will be made in how collective bargaining is approached in the state.

Citing a policy summary published by the Wheeler Report, Supt. Bill Harbron said Walker intends to remove pension and health insurance contributions from collective bargaining talks for all public employees, including teachers.

"It appears the only point we would be negotiating is salaries, and only for one-year contracts," Harbron said.

"Salaries will be limited to the Consumer Price Index. If we want to go above the CPI, it would require going to referendum."

The bigger question for school districts around the state is the level of state aids. Harbron said he was told to prepare alternative budgets, leaving student aids at their current level, and anticipating that level to increase by \$100 per student or decrease by \$100 per student.

Although uncertainty surrounds the question of school funding, Harbron said board members should brace for substantial change.

Harbron said Walker's Budget Repair Bill sends a clear message that he expects school districts to reduce operating costs.

"My personal viewpoint is there is no stopping this. I think it is going to pass," he told the board.

Walker sounded just as sure in a letter he had distributed to state teachers on Monday, explaining measures he intends to include in his Budget Repair Bill to tackle a \$3.6 billion state

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deficit anticipated over the next two years.

“My goal in balancing the budget is to give government the maximum flexibility to absorb the necessary spending reductions with the smallest impact on core services possible,” Walker said in his letter to teachers. “I know my proposal will be less money in paychecks, but it will help keep more money in the classroom.”

Harbron said the uncertainty of how the new rules will be applied to contracts made a delay on the agreement prudent.

“The teachers came to these negotiations in good faith, and we came to them in good faith, but the whole game has changed,” he said.

Harbron warned the board not to use the changing attitudes in Madison as a weapon against the teachers, saying, “You still need to honor your employees.”

After the meeting, Terry Hendrikse, head negotiator for the FEA, expressed disappointment.

“We have been working on trying to settle this complex contract for over two years, and considering the many variables at play wanted to make sure we did the best thing possible for education and the students at NOSD,” Hendrikse said.

“There is considerable uncertainty right now at the state level and I am sure the board simply wants to make sure they understand a little more before they take a vote. We have a tentative agreement that we have shaken hands over. Delaying the vote one month will not change that.”

He said the union understands the economics of the time and is ready to support the lowest voluntary settlement in the district in decades.