

School officials place teachers contract, retirements on hold until budget-repair law uncertainty clears

Although Gov. Scott Walker signed his budget-repair bill into law last week, the Northern Ozaukee School Board remained reluctant to take action Monday on key labor issues until the dust settles in Madison.

The board voted 7-1 to table action on a proposed two-year contract with the teachers union, contending too many questions remain unanswered on how districts should approach settlements in an era when collective bargaining no longer exists.

The contract offers no salary increases other than the yearly step progressions spelled out in the previous contract and the actual cost of benefits over the two years.

The proposed contract only covers the last and the current school years. Teachers in the Fredonia Education Association have been working without a contract since 2008-09.

The lone board member who voted against postponing action on the contract was Tom Hoffmann, who said approving a contract might calm the fears of many teachers following the unrest in Madison.

"I don't want this contract to become a political football. I would just as soon get this done as soon as possible," Hoffmann said.

"There is a lot of uncertainty and angst out there, and we should do what we can to keep it from festering."

The anxiety level of the teaching staff was heightened Feb. 25, when the district issued tentative layoff notices to all teachers for what was termed "budgetary purposes."

That initial shock was eased when memorandums of understanding were provided to all teachers, explaining that the district intended to retain as many teachers as possible. The memo gives the district until May 20 to finalize layoffs.

District officials had been left in limbo on staffing moves until the state Legislature completed work on the budget-repair bill.

Preliminary planning for the upcoming school year had officials projecting that four teaching positions would be eliminated. Additional savings will be realized by combining the high school and middle school principal positions.

Business Manager Walter Clarke said the state funding question remains unclear because of the shifting of students through the open enrollment process.

NOSB reluctant to make labor moves

Written by Mark Jaeger

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According to the latest calculations from the Department of Public Instruction, the district is slated to receive \$719,000 less in per-pupil state aids next year.

Despite the staff reductions and anticipated savings from the budget-repair bill, Clarke said the “best guess” is that the district will need to reduce spending by an additional \$200,000.

With a mandate to maintain a balanced budget, Board President Paul Krause said the board needs to consider what kind of personnel moves are needed and what student-teacher ratios would be acceptable.

“I think we should begin the process of deciding what our classrooms would look like and getting a sense of who won’t have a place when this is done,” Krause said.

“I know the staff is uneasy about this. I want them to be at ease.”

The board’s Finance Committee was asked to consider staffing recommendations during its March 30 meeting.

The board also tabled votes on the retirement of four teachers.

Middle school physical-education teacher Michael Falkner, second-grade teacher Kathy Pixler and Wisconsin Virtual Learning teacher Cheryl Frye applied for early retirement, and high school English teacher Sandy Didier applied for retirement starting next February.

Labor attorney John Haase recommended that the board delay action on the retirements until the budget-repair bill takes effect on March 26 and “after we can provide a more thorough analysis of the potential legal risks.”

Despite the delay, Krause took a conciliatory stand on the retirements.

“I am not in favor of changing the early retirement benefits these people have worked so hard to earn,” he said.

Krause and Hoffmann voted against tabling approval of the retirements.

Supt. Bill Harbron said the impact of the Republican-led Legislature’s decision to limit collective bargaining only to questions of pay has had an immediate impact on how schools operate.

“I have already had three or four insurance companies contact me, saying they would like our business,” Harbron said.