

Virtual staff faces possible layoffs

Written by Mark Jaeger
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School Board supports preliminary notices to 7 teachers because of uncertain on-line enrollment

Wisconsin Virtual Learning, the charter school operated by the Northern Ozaukee School District, got the bulk of the attention Monday when the School Board issued preliminary layoff notices to teachers for the coming school year.

Burned by overstaffing as virtual enrollment dropped during the current school year, the board voted to give preliminary layoff notices to seven teachers in the virtual program along with a half-time guidance position.

In addition, the board backed a one-year voluntary layoff at Ozaukee Elementary School and the layoff of one special education teacher.

Projections suggest enrollment in the bricks-and-mortar schools will hold relatively steady next year at 766 students.

Under its contract with the Fredonia Education Association, the district had to issue preliminary layoff notices by Thursday, April 15. Final layoffs for the coming school year must be made by May 20.

While contemplating staffing needs, district officials have been wrestling with the uncertainty of enrollment in the on-line charter program. They opted to plan for a worst-case scenario.

According to projections from the district, the virtual program — which offers at-home classes to students in kindergarten through high school — student counts could range from 650 and 850.

The most likely scenario, according to Business Manager Walter Clarke, is that virtual enrollment will be about 750 students — roughly equal to the current count.

The district has commitments from 488 current students who plan to return to the program next year. Another 133 students are undecided. In addition, about 1,000 students said they were interested in WVL during the state's open enrollment process.

Only a fraction of those who sign up for open enrollment typically become virtual

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students, which convinced some board members to read those numbers with caution.

“I think we need to learn the difference between a bird in the hand and a bird in the bush,” said board member Kendall Thistle as he urged his colleagues not to put too much faith in enrollment projections.

“If come October, the virtual count starts dropping off again, we’ll be in the same position we were this year.”

Board member Stacey Stark took a different approach, worrying about the implications if the district is too cautious in planning for its virtual enrollment.

“Staffing for an enrollment of 650 (students) is prudent, but are we going to lose staff? They are not going to just sit around, waiting for us to decide,” Stark said.

After approving the preliminary layoff notices, the board also approved a tentative call-back plan if virtual enrollment rises higher than the 650 worst-case scenario.

The first move will be to restore the guidance position to full-time. Teachers would then be added at the high school level as needed.

If there is uncertainty whether the workload at the virtual high school program justifies hiring a teacher, Supt. Bill Harbron said the district would consider “splitting” teachers so that they would have classes at Ozaukee High School and with WVL.

Complicating the layoff decision is the district’s commitment to deliver employment news to staff members face to face. Because virtual teachers live around the state, the WVL staff will be traveling this week to inform informs of their tenuous job positions.

Harbron said gaining board support for the job restoration plan is critical.

“When we speak to the staff, we want to be able to assure them that when enrollment reaches a given point we will take these steps,” he said.

The board backed the tentative restoration plan, 8-1, with Francis Kleckner opposed.

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Board members were also warned that because the virtual teachers are members of the teachers' union, there is the possibility that they could invoke "bumping rights," taking the position of a less-senior brick-and-mortar teacher.

That bumping could occur only if the teachers are equally qualified. Teachers who are bumped by laid-off WVL staff members must be notified by April 30.