

School Board backs union in pay dispute

Written by MARK JAEGER
Wednesday, 21 July 2010 18:45

Grievance protested demand for receipts to get tuition reimbursement

The Northern Ozaukee School Board voted 6-3 last week to support the teachers' union in a grievance over tuition reimbursement, overturning a decision by Supt. Bill Harbron.

The Fredonia Education Association filed the grievance, protesting the administration's refusal to reimburse tuition payments to two teachers without providing receipts.

The district's collective bargaining agreement with the union says teachers will be reimbursed \$100 per credit for classes leading to a master's degree in their area of study, and \$350 per credit for related graduate-level courses beyond a master's degree.

Teacher Terry Hendrikse, lead negotiator with the FEA, said it has been past practice for the district to make the tuition payments once a passing grade is received.

"Our expectation is that the contract will be followed. It is kind of foolhardy to proceed with the grievance, in a process that would be costly to all of us, when past practice has been to reimburse for credits," Hendrikse said.

"It comes down to a question of what the word 'reimburse' means," said Board President Paul Krause.

"We don't reimburse you mileage for 100 miles if the trip only took 30 miles. It is supposed to be reimbursement for cost incurred."

John Haase, the district's attorney, wrote a four-page letter on the matter. He noted that the district has been inconsistent in requiring receipts before tuition payments are made to teachers.

However, Haase said, the union has not objected to the district's practice of not taking deductions off the tuition payments, suggesting they are not considered wages or bonus pay.

Hendrikse said "the philosophical debate" about what reimbursement means should be addressed in contract talks.

Board member Francis Kleckner, a veteran of contract talks, said the board should follow the letter of the agreement.

"If the contract says we pay \$350, we pay \$350. If he wants to cheat the government, that's his problem and I hope the IRS catches up with him," Kleckner said of the reimbursement issue.

Taking their cue from Kleckner, the board voted 6-3 to back the union request.

However, the vote was not without nuance.

"We are trying to teach our children integrity and honesty, and this is not sending the right

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message,” said Stacie Stark, who voted against the motion to overturn the administration’s ruling.

“Personally, I agree with that sentiment,” Hendrikse said.

Business Manager Walter Clarke said will address the tuition payments differently, following the board vote.

“In lieu of getting a receipt, we will be reporting each \$350 payment to the IRS as income,” Clarke said.