

School aides, district still at odds over cuts

Written by Steve Ostermann
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After having grievance rejected by School Board, paraprofessionals weigh options to rescind reductions

Paraprofessionals in the Grafton School District are continuing to protest pay cuts they say were unfair, have negatively impacted students and could have been rescinded using federal money the district received to reinstate staff members.

Members of the Grafton Paraprofessional and Aides Association, which represents 28 employees who work with special-education students, voiced objections last spring when the School Board decided to pare their after-school pay.

The decision — which reduced paraprofessionals' hours at Grafton High School, John Long Middle School and three elementary schools — was part of a cost-savings effort that also included not replacing guidance and library staff members who retired or resigned.

The paraprofessionals each lost an average of 2-1/2 hours of pay per week.

In recommending the cuts, Supt. Jeff Pechura said the reductions saved the district \$376,337, were made in consultation with school administrators and “had the least direct impact on student learning.”

In response, the association filed a grievance with the board contending the cutbacks — or “partial layoffs” issued in May that included hour, wage and benefit reductions — violated terms of their contract with the district. Although the grievance was rejected by the board in October, both sides have since met in closed session several times — including last month — in a failed effort to resolve the dispute.

“It has been to no avail,” Pechura said. “We believe that we have made a decision that was in the best interest of the district, and they believe otherwise. No matter where you make these kind of cuts, someone is going to be unhappy.

“The paraprofessionals and aides are disappointed, but tough decisions had to be made.”

Pechura defended the board's decision not to rescind the pay cuts even though the district was awarded \$679,000 from the federal Education Jobs Fund to defray the cost of staff salaries and benefits. In October, the board voted to use \$339,421 of the money to cover a spending shortfall in the 2010-11 budget.

“That money was used to offset other costs,” Pechura said. “The paraprofessionals kept all their jobs. The aides are very important, but there is other support available to help, including teachers and volunteers.”

One of the major increases in the 2010-11 budget was a 3.4% increase in salaries and benefits for teachers as part of a two-year contract with the Grafton Education Association.

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In a letter to Ozaukee Press addressed to district residents, Pam Nunez, the chief negotiator for the paraprofessionals and aides, stated that the board's decision not to reinstate the cutbacks "has directly affected the education of your children."

"Their success in the classroom is impacted due to the Special Education Aides not being fully accessible to conferencing, complete medical paperwork and follow up with the student's teachers," Nunez wrote.

Nunez, a special-education aide at Grafton Elementary School, questioned why the board refuses to reconsider its decision even after the district was awarded more than enough money to rescind the cuts.

"If the federal government understands the need to support (and provide the monetary assistance to help) people now, why doesn't Dr. Pechura and members of the School Board?" she wrote.

Pechura said the board proposed several changes, including hiring a literacy coach, to help address members' concerns, but the proposals were rejected.

"We really don't think we or the students and their families have been treated fairly," Nunez said Tuesday.

Nunez said association members are expected to decide in the near future if they want to file a prohibitive practice complaint with the Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission. After reviewing the complaint, the commission could turn it over to a mediator to resolve.