

Teachers get 1.6% pay hike in contract

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Base wage increase for current year is maximum allowed without referendum

Grafton School District teachers are poised to receive a 1.64% salary increase.

The pay hike is included in a collective bargaining agreement unanimously approved by the Grafton School Board on Monday.

Supt. Jeff Pechura said the increase, which would cover the 2011-12 school year, is contingent on approval by the teachers' union, the Grafton Education Association. Members are expected to vote on the agreement by the end of this week.

"I am expecting ratification without delay by Friday," Pechura said.

Pechura said the wage hike was negotiated by district and union representatives during contract talks that have been ongoing throughout the school year. The 1.64% figure, based on a directive from the Wisconsin Employment Relations Committee, is the maximum increase allowed by law without a referendum, he noted.

"My only comment about the agreement is that it was a collective effort by the district and union," Pechura said.

Under the state budget law that stripped public-employee unions of collective bargaining rights, base salary is the only negotiable part of teacher contracts. Union members are now required to contribute 12.6% of the cost of their health-insurance premiums and 5.8% to the Wisconsin Retirement System for pensions.

Those contributions saved the Grafton district more than \$940,000 for the 2011-12 school year.

Insurance and pension contributions, as well as policies covering job performance, working conditions, grievances and other provisions formerly included in contracts, are now included in a handbook adopted early this year by the board.

Pending GEA approval of the agreement, officials are expected to soon begin work on a 2012-13 contract. The union on Monday asked the board to start negotiations, a process Pechura said is likely to take several months.

In preparation for the 2012-13 budget, the board is continuing to explore options for health insurance. The Willis Group has been hired as an insurance consultant and will prepare recommendations, including a possible change of carriers.

Grafton's longtime carrier is WEA Trust, but the district could follow the lead of other area districts and switch to a plan altering coverages and requiring higher premiums and deductibles. Recently, the Port Washington-Saukville School District changed carriers from WEA Trust to

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Humana with the expectation of saving more than \$990,000 in the 2012-13 year.

Pechura said the Willis Group will continue to meet with the district's Finance Committee to finalize a health-insurance plan that would go into effect Jan. 1, 2013. The committee is expected to make a recommendation to the School Board by this fall.

"We have projections on potential savings, but we will continue to consider all our options," Pechura said. "We'll look for the most cost-effective, efficient plan that's fair to our employees."

Although insurance coverage is no longer a negotiable contract item, GEA members have been invited to attend Finance Committee meetings and offer comments and suggestions, Pechura said.