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But handbook approved by board Monday is still missing information about health insurance plan, pay

The Port Washington-Saukville School Board voted unanimously Monday to approve an employee manual that, while incomplete, suggests employees will continue to receive benefits similar to those currently provided for teachers.

The manual, which will replace contracts for teachers and support staff members on July 1, does not yet include details about health insurance coverage because the board is waiting for the results of an analysis being conducted by a consultant. The district is seeking bids from four providers, including WEA Trust, which currently provides health insurance for employees, Supt. Michael Weber said.

Also missing from the manual is salary and wage information. Weber said the district, like others throughout Wisconsin, is waiting for clarification on provisions of Act 10, also known as the state's budget-repair law.

Act 10 ended collective bargaining for most public employees except when it comes to wages. The law allows employees to bargain for pay increases up to the rate of inflation, or consumer price index, but there is confusion about how to determine base wages for employees, Weber said.

The product of months of work by the board's Personnel and Programs Committee, the manual is specific when it comes to other benefits.

Employees will be responsible for half of their pension contributions, with the district contributing the other half.

Salaried employees will continue to pay 13% of their health insurance premiums. The manual calls for employees who are paid an hourly wage to pay 10% of their premiums, although officials are still reviewing this contribution.

In several ways, specifically when it comes to pension contributions and health insurance premium payments, the manual reflects a one-year teacher contract extension approved by the board a year ago. Although the contract was approved prior to Act 10 taking effect, it complied with the provisions of the law and constituted the most significant changes to benefits in recent history. The contract expires June 30.

The manual does not indicate whether the district will continue to offer employees a cash payment in lieu of health insurance coverage. That decision will be made based on information provided by the insurance consultant.

Currently, employees who opt for the cash instead of coverage receive an amount equal to

the district's share of the single coverage premium, Weber said.

For teachers, that is $7,785 a year, Director of Business Services Jim Froemming said.

The payment was designed in part to be an incentive for employees whose spouses have access to insurance to cover their families under his or her health insurance policy rather than the district's plan. With the family premium costing the district $18,960 per teacher annually, the difference between insuring the employee's family and paying them not to have insurance is significant.

Currently, 61 of the district's 280 full-time employees opt for the payment in lieu of insurance, Froemming said.

"The question is, if you didn't offer that payment, would everyone jump on our insurance?" Froemming asked. "No, not everyone, but some undoubtedly would. No one really knows where the break-even point is."

The manual will maintain other insurance benefits, such as district-funded long-term disability, state group life and dental insurance. Employees must pay 13% of their dental premiums.

The manual also maintains paid sick leave for professional employees who work at least half time. These employee will receive 10 sick days per year and may accumulate as many as 90 days of leave, although how they can use these days is regulated.

According to the manual, upon retirement, employees will receive $100 per day of unused sick leave that can be used only to pay for dental insurance, although this provision is still being reviewed by the board.

Professional staff members also receive two personal leave days per year, which cannot be carried over or accumulated. Employees, who do not need to specify why they are using professional days, are paid for the first day they take. They are compensated for the second day of personal leave minus $100 to compensate the district for paying a substitute teacher.

In addition, employees are eligible for between one and five days off due to the death of a relative or friend.

In terms of retirement, the manual reflects changes made in the last teacher contract, which increased both the minimum age and years of service employees must have to qualify for post-employment benefits. Employees must be at least 57 and have 20 years of service in the district.

Employees who meet those requirements are eligible for continuing single or family heath insurance until they reach age 65. The district's annual premium contribution is set at the date of retirement and the maximum insurance benefit is capped at $150,000.

Although the manual will take effect on July 1 for teachers and support staff members, it will not pertain to custodians until 2013 because they have a year remaining on their contract.

Weber said the board plans to work quickly to complete the employee manual.