

800 teachers face District 15 board

By Jamie Francisco
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Tensions surrounding contract talks cast a pall over the Community Consolidated School District 15 board meeting Wednesday night as nearly 800 teachers filled the room in solidarity against district officials.

But both sides in the Palatine-based elementary school district assured parents that a strike is not imminent and that contract talks will continue, even though the teachers union is preparing for a strike vote next week.

The board has offered a 9.25 percent salary increase over three years, and teachers are seeking 24 percent over the same period, school board President Nancy Carlson said.

"The board values its teachers and other certified staff and wants to compensate them fairly in acknowledgement of their excellent work on behalf of our students," she said. "However, a 24 percent salary increase is not in the best fiscal interest of the district."

In response, teachers stood as Classroom Teachers Council President Jan Belzer read a statement on behalf of the union, contending that political agendas and personal motivations of the board have slowed progress in negotiations.

"We are asking for an agreement which honors the work we have done, the job we are doing and the people we are," Belzer said.

After she finished, the teachers filed out, emptying the Sundling Junior High School gymnasium in Palatine.

At issue in addition to salary are disagreements over insurance and retirement benefits and class size.

The district also has proposed changing its prescription drug programs, Carlson said.

The union agreed last month to the district's request for federal mediation. The next bargaining session is scheduled for next Tuesday.

The district maintains that progress has been made and that a contract solution is possible.

"We're very far away at this point from a strike," Carlson said Tuesday.

"The teachers have their position and we have ours, but we are working with a mediator

in the hopes that we will come together."

After more than a year of sometimes-testy negotiations, District 15 announced last week that it would freeze teacher salaries until an agreement is reached on a new contract. The union called the decision a violation of Illinois labor law and announced that it would ask members to vote Monday to authorize a strike.

The agreed-upon salary adjustments will be made once a new contract is approved, Carlson said. In addition to base salaries, teachers get "step" increases for additional years of experience and "lane" increases for additional education.

"We are still paying the teachers," Carlson said.

"They're still getting their salaries."

In 1982, when district teachers last went on strike, the district honored the increases called for under an expiring contract.

Since then, the district has changed its policy, Carlson said.

The union argues that the salary freeze creates a financial hardship for teachers, who were counting on yearly raises to pay off student loans for advanced degrees or post-graduate work, said Lisa Nuss, the union's executive director and chief negotiator.

If teachers vote Monday to authorize a strike, the earliest they could walk out would be Sept. 28, under terms of the Illinois Education Labor Relations Act.

"We would like to have a contract settled without having to strike, and we are hoping the board is hoping to work in cooperation with us to have that be the final result," Nuss said.

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