

Dist. 15 teachers rally behind union

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Hundreds of teachers in Palatine Township Elementary District 15 flooded Wednesday's school board meeting as a sign of solidarity and support for the union as contract negotiations drag on.

Teachers from all schools in the district packed the meeting at Walter Sundling Junior High School to support Jan Belzer, president of the Classroom Teachers Council (CTC), the union that represents the 772 District 15 teachers and certified staff, as she addressed the school board, just days before the union is set to vote on a possible strike.

"It's been over 24 years since the teachers in our community have taken such steps and we do so now only as a last resort," Belzer said. "We're being forced to do so by unfair and unjust school board positions that have put politics, resentment, emotion and short-term, short-sighted positions ahead of the overall health of our school district, the students and community we serve."

Following Belzer's comments, many of the teachers walked out of the meeting, prompting a more than 15-minute delay while the room was cleared. The teachers have been working without a contract since the previous one expired Aug. 31.

Prior to the statement from the union, school board President Nancy Lee Carlson addressed the teachers and parents at the meeting on the state of the negotiations.

"While a strike is possible, we are hopeful that under the continued guidance of an impartial federal mediator, the board (of education) and CTC will be able to reach a fair and fiscally responsible contract agreement without a disruption to the education process," Carlson said.

While the two sides had kept quiet on the specifics of the negotiations since federal mediation began late last month, Carlson said in light of the union's decision to call for a strike vote next week, the board thought it was important to review some of those details with those at the meeting.

Issues still needing to be negotiated, Carlson said, include both salaries and health-care benefits.

The district is currently offering a 9.25 percent salary increase to be spread out over the next three years, while the union has countered with a 24 percent increase, Carlson said.

"A 24 percent salary increase is not in the best fiscal interest of the district," Carlson said.

Lisa Nuss, chief negotiator for the union, disputed those figures.

"When they are comparing percentages, they are comparing percentages of two different numbers," Nuss said. "It is not an equal comparison."

On Monday, the union will meet as a whole to vote on whether or not to file the proper paperwork with the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board giving it the option to strike.

That, however, does not mean the union can or will begin striking.

If the union approves the vote Monday, a 10-day notice to strike will be filed, which gives the union the option of striking anytime after that.

The union, however, has said it still plans to continue bargaining before taking such drastic steps.

"Our current proposal is not our last," Nuss said. "We are still willing to work with them."

Other issues still on the table, Carlson said, include retirement benefits and class size issues.

For updates on the negotiations, parents and residents can visit both the district's Web site at www.ccsd15.net and the teacher's union Web site at www.ctteachers.com.

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