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Weekend work results in tentative agreement

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Elementary School District 15 School Board and teachers union negotiators averted a strike this week after a marathon weekend bargaining session.

"We negotiated Friday and all day Saturday and Sunday, about 10 hours a day," Board President Nancy Lee Carlson said. "The board has had different (board member representatives) at the negotiations at different times. We are pleased we were able to finally bridge a gap. It's a good conclusion."

Negotiators reached a tentative three-year contract; details are not being released until the union membership has a chance to vote whether to ratify it Monday (Oct. 23).

Many rumors surrounded the negotiations. Chief union negotiator Lisa Nuss said although parents were taking personal effects home Friday, a strike date was never discussed.

"Our mindset Friday was to go in and get a contract," she said. "I know many people presumed that (Monday) would be a strike date. We were prepared, but we never even discussed setting a date." Parents and concerned residents paid a great deal of attention to the negotiation process, particularly after Aug. 31 when teachers were working without a contract.

Community members packed board meetings, told both sides they wanted to avoid a strike and expressed frustration at the lack of information coming from the negotiators.

Mediator's guidance

Union negotiators did not share proposal details during the process. Near the end of the process, a federal mediator asked both sides to withhold information from the public.

"What happens most of the time is that issues get misquoted or people react to positions that aren't positions," said federal mediator Dan O'Leary, the supervisor of mediator Tom Summers who was directly involved in the District 15 negotiations. "Also when the public is aware of a position, one side or the other has to publicly defend their actions. And if you move from that position, you can inflame the negotiators."

O'Leary said silence allows both sides to explore proposals without jeopardizing their official position at the bargaining table.

"Mediators have no enforcement authority, however," he said.

For example, a mediator could not refuse to work with a particular negotiator or group of negotiators.

"They are not there to get involved with the internal politics of either association," O'Leary said.

Financial outlook

At the Oct. 11 School Board meeting, residents said they were concerned too high a pay raise for teachers could lead to an increase in property taxes or the district would have to spend in deficit.

District 15 officials, however, point to some positive financial trends.

A costly retirement program, which gave 20 percent bumps in salary shortly before retirement, is ending in the district.

In 2009, the district expects about \$1 million in revenue from the retirement of a tax increment finance district in Palatine, Superintendent Robert McKanna said.

"We will be presenting our property tax levy at our next board meeting (Oct. 25)," McKanna said. "I don't see any change in programming as a result of this settlement. And there is no discussion of a referendum at this stage, and I don't see one in our immediate future."

Bargaining benefits

According to the Illinois State Board of Education, there have been fewer school strikes since the passage of the collective bargaining act in 1983.

National Education Association spokesman Charlie McBaron said the reason is that teachers and school boards are on more equal footing and are more professional.

Educational bargaining attorney Fred B. Lifton said that the statute eliminated one of the most prevailing causes for strikes, which was refusal to engage in bargaining.

"I've negotiated over 1,000 contracts, both before and after the collective bargaining act was passed," he said. "The parties have become more mature as they have become more experienced."

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