

Factfinder's report offers olive branch in teacher negotiations

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Short- and long-term pay increase options are at the heart of a mediator's factfinding report issued Tuesday to the Del Norte County Unified School District and the Del Norte Teachers Association.

The report by Renée Mayne, an arbitrator and mediator for the state Public Employees Relations Board, is a non-binding recommendation stemming from a meeting Dec. 5 between the district and the teachers, after they had reached an impasse despite nearly a year of negotiations.

The mediator's short-term recommendation is a 2% increase in both teacher salaries and teacher flat-dollar stipends, effective July 1, 2019.

According to the report, this option would not guarantee additional salary hikes in future years.

The cost to the school district was estimated at \$360,000 each year.

The pay recommendation for the long term would offer the following additional increases in upcoming years:

- A three-year agreement that provides a 2% salary increase each year from July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2022.
 - An additional 0.5% salary increase if “local control funding formula” revenue increases by 3.5% or more from the prior year, in 2020-21 and 2021-22.
 - An additional 0.5% salary increase if the revenue formula increases by 4% or more from the prior year, in 2020-21 and 2021-22 (up to a total of 1% additional per year).
- For school districts and charter schools, the local control funding formula establishes uniform grade span grants, including revenue limits, general-purpose block grants and most state categorical programs.
- An increase of \$500 per year towards health and welfare for the years 2020-21 and 2021-22.
 - A 2% increase in the flat-dollar stipend each year of the three years 2019-20 through 2021-22.
 - The district and the teachers’ union would establish a labor management committee to explore health insurance options.

According to the mediator’s report, the long-term option provides for a guaranteed total increase of 7.14% at the end of three years - at a three-year cost increase to the district of 13.72%, which equates to just over \$2.4 million.

If the local control funding increases beyond the above thresholds, the potential of an additional 2% salary increase provides the possibility of additional raises for the faculty.

Michael Hawkins, the school district’s director of communications, said by email that “the Del Norte County Unified School District Board of Trustees agrees with the factfinder’s report and fully supports the multi-year option, as it provides guaranteed salary and health and welfare increases to teachers and other certificated staff members and allows the board time to review current budget allocations.

“This option also allows district staff the opportunity to develop a list of suggested budget changes and/or reductions that will be necessary to maintain a balanced budget for the future.”

Marshall Jones, the teachers’ association president, said there were recommendations in the mediator’s factfinding report that were favorable for his members.

“We’re pretty pleased with the report. The mediator highlighted that there is a crisis within the district, especially with retention, and the district is not doing anything to address retention,” he said.

However, Jones said, union negotiators felt the district’s numbers provided to the mediator regarding proposed pay increases were misleading, resulting in a lower recommended figure.

“We are still fighting for our community to ensure students have the best teachers they can have. In order to attract premium teachers, they need to have a salary that attracts the best,” Jones said.

“I don’t hold a lot of hope out. I don’t see them reaching out with a contract that is equitable and fair.”

Meantime, a new contentious issue has evolved from the negotiation process: the definition of just what constitutes a “last, best and final offer.”

In a Jan. 13 letter to teachers’ union members, Jones wrote: “Last week, for the first time (school district Superintendent) Jeff Harris announced that the district has no intention of finishing the bargaining process and will not be imposing a last, best and final offer.

“They are acting in bad faith by refusing to finish the bargaining process, and they are attempting to prevent a settlement that would help end our teacher recruitment and retention crisis.”

Harris told The TriPLICATE that a difference of opinion regarding the definition of a “last, best and final offer” is understandable.

“By law,” said Harris, “‘last, best and final offer’ is not the last step of a negotiating process. The last, best and final offer is the ability to do an implementation...

“A lot goes into a last, best and final offer. Our district hasn’t indicated we have a last, best and final offer. We haven’t told them we intend to impose one,” Harris said.

“Throughout the state, a last, best and final offer typically is imposed when reducing salary benefits, reducing pay and overall compensation. Not very often is it used to take a raise in the negotiating process.”

In December, slightly more than 90% of the Del Norte Teachers Association members voted to go on strike if an agreement was not signed. By law, the association must give the school district three days’ notice if it is taking that action.

While the two sides continued to meet this week in negotiations, the union continued its preparations should there be a strike.

Jones said picket captains held a meeting Tuesday, and a general membership meeting was scheduled for Thursday evening, with a community outreach meeting to follow.