

Del Norte teachers authorize strike

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More than 90% of the Del Norte Teachers Association's members voted Dec. 18 to authorize the union's executive board to call a strike if a contract settlement is not reached.

"We want what's best for our students, and extreme teacher turnover hurts our kids," said union president Marshall Jones in a press release.

"Over the last three years, there has been a 47% turnover (in teachers) and that means some students see different educators on a monthly basis. This lack of consistency fails students, leaving them more unconnected than ever before."

The vote authorizes the chapter's executive board to call a strike if no agreement is reached after the contract bargaining process has been exhausted. That process will be finished when a state factfinder's report is released Jan. 14.

The two sides met with a state mediator on Dec. 5 in a factfinding session for more than 19 hours.

Del Norte Superintendent Jeff Harris said the factfinding panel consisted of a representative for the teachers' union, a representative of the school district, and a neutral representative from the State Public Employee Relations Board.

The neutral representative listened to arguments from both parties and worked to fully understand all issues, Harris said. The neutral representative has since filed a draft of their finding.

"Both sides have a copy of the draft finding. Both are able to take a look at the report," he said.

"If no agreement is reached by Jan. 14, the report becomes public, published by the district in its entirety for public to review.

"Once it's made public, the (teachers' union) can strike and we move forward from there," Harris told The Triplicate.

"Obviously, we're disappointed by where we are at this point in time," he added. "While we've come to an agreement on a number of issues in the contract, the compensation in health and welfare are still an outstanding issue.

"We're continuing negotiating, continuing to have conversations to reach a fair and equitable agreement that protects students and teachers as well."

At issue is the school district's latest, best offer of a 1% guaranteed pay increase and a one-time, 1% pay increase based on current student enrollment numbers, according to district spokesman Michael Hawkins.

Hawkins said the overall raises offered to the teachers by the district for this year may be only 2%, but they include "a hidden cost to the district that is not shown here from retirement and other benefits."

That comes to about a 2.6% cost increase to the district to give the teachers a 2% salary raise, he said.

Jones said the teachers' union disagrees that the district's offer amounts to that much of a pay hike. He said the association's negotiators are seeking

a 3.26% raise, which would reflect a cost-of-living adjustment in state funding that the school district is expected to receive.

Meantime, Jones said, he learned Dec. 12 that the school administration already is taking steps to keep schools open should the union strike.

"(The) district has contracted to the Humboldt School District for substitutes to come up on buses to break up a strike," Jones said he'd learned from "intercepted correspondence."

"If teachers strike, the district seems to have an extra \$366 to give subs to break up a strike," said Jones.

Del Norte school officials said in media reports that the correspondence Jones had intercepted was a confidential document sent to local building principals. Human Resources Director Colleen Parker

acknowledged she had inquired of the Humboldt County Office of Education about dipping into its substitute teacher pool if a strike occurs here.

On average, teachers in Del Norte County receive \$366 a day. Parker said the administration is preparing a resolution to send to the district's board of trustees on Jan. 9 detailing the administration's recommended compensation for substitute teachers to fill in should a strike occur.

Harris said keeping schools open during a potential strike is about more than instructional learning.

"We are looking at how best to serve our students if, in fact, a strike occurs. Many families are dependent on school-provided breakfast and lunch, as well as providing a place to go during the day, as some have two parents working.

"We will continue, to the best of our ability, to provide services (and) a high-quality instructional day," Harris said.

Jones said that the contract negotiations now are more than about just pay raises. Rather, the talks also are about teacher retention.

He pointed out that 25% of the union's teachers are eligible to retire, which most of them are considering because of their perceived poor treatment by the school district's management.

Jones added that newly hired teachers are resigning weekly to seek employment in other districts.

"There have been four resignations in the last few months because of the way teachers are being treated," he said. "The last one was (Dec. 18)."

He said there have been a minimal number of applicants for recent teacher vacancies and that "refusing to attract and retain great teachers creates a crisis that will cripple our community's education for teachers, for parents and for students now and in the future.

"Call it the 'Ghost of Christmas future.' This crisis is real and this crisis is now."