

Teachers want 4 percent salary increase

BY JOHN L. GUERRA , Citizen Staff

Negotiations between the Monroe County school district and unionized public school teachers began Monday with a wide chasm.

The pay and benefits envelope negotiators for the United Teachers of Monroe slid across the table to school officials Monday contained a request for an annual 4.08 percent pay raise and a 2 percent increase in step pay, said union President Leon Fowler. Step pay rewards teachers for length of service; they receive extra money at five years and every five years of service after that.

The district, however, denied any increase in pay or insurance benefits for nearly 600 public school teachers because it said it has no money to do so.

Yet the district wants teachers to commit more time to meetings, sporting events and other activities. Teachers work 37.5 hours a week and provide 2.5 hours beyond that for non-classroom responsibilities. It's the norm to work 2.5 hours about once a month, Fowler said, but starting next year, teachers would have to work those extra hours every week.

He calls that "the most disturbing proposal."

"We're trying to reduce that [after-school] time; teachers already spend hours every evening doing lesson plans, grading papers, and doing research online," Fowler said. "They want to make it permanent with no compensation for it."

Deputy Schools Super-intendent Frankie St. James, the district's lead negotiator, said there's no money to increase salaries or improve insurance benefits.

"We've been working on the budget and there's no money for raises," she said. "The budget has to get under control. We can't be in the red."

The district's budget for next year is set at \$88 million; to get there from the present \$94 million, schools will have to cut \$6 million.

It's no secret the education money the state sends to schools across Florida has been drying up, but the Florida Department of Education (DOE) has ordered Monroe County and other school districts to return millions of dollars it received last year. The DOE is expected to ask for even more money back in the fall.

There is money for raises, Fowler argues, because the district is saving money from teachers who are leaving the Keys.

"At my last count, there were 69 teachers leaving the area, including retirees, teachers whose contracts weren't renewed, and people leaving on their own initiative. If you need to save [money], there's your opportunity."

Neither side seems worried. Negotiating teams meet again May 30 in Marathon, followed by June 3 and 5 in Key West. Teachers and the district might not decide on a contract for a month or longer.

When there's plenty of money, contracts can be finalized in less than a week, St. James said. The money is tight this year, so there's no telling how long it will be before a 2009 contract is finalized.

"It's early," Fowler said. "They have to play their games. They're still cutting the budget and all that."

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