

Op-Ed: Movement, Not Meetings, Needed For Timely Contract Settlement

By Susanmarie Harrington, Burlington School Commissioner, Ward 5

As we near the August 31 expiration date for the current teacher contract between the Burlington School Board and the teachers' union, the Burlington Education Association (BEA), it's helpful to review the evolution of the negotiation process and consider a path to a timely settlement.

Timeline of negotiations

Since late October, the Board has consistently sought to advance contract negotiations in order to avoid the disruption that takes place if a settlement has not been reached prior to the start of school. The BEA was prepared to offer proposals to start the bargaining process only at the end of January. Once negotiations commenced in January, the Board and BEA teams met 9 times, followed by a mediation and fact-finding process, and then by additional meetings in July and August.

At the August meeting, no teacher negotiators attended; as a result, the VT-NEA negotiator representing the BEA was unable to respond substantively to a new Board proposal. The BEA was not available to negotiate again until August 24.

Costs of extending negotiations beyond start of school year

Given the slow pace of scheduling sessions over the summer, it is not surprising that we find ourselves with negotiations unsettled as the school year is about to begin. When a contract is not settled at a late date, community members advise to keep talking. That seems like common sense: buckle down and keep at the hard work until agreement is reached. But if there is no sign that negotiations are really moving toward a mutually acceptable compromise on the issues, continued negotiations have very real costs for the community.

- First, continuing negotiations that should have been completed in the prior year diverts Board and administrative attention away from the budget preparation process and addressing other important educational policy matters.
- It needlessly increases the District's legal expenses for negotiations and other potential litigation. Moreover, the 7 other District unions are waiting for the teacher contract settlement before engaging in more meaningful talks.
- And this year, given changes to the state insurance plan for teachers (VEHI), failing to have a contract or employment policy in place by the beginning of October will result in all teachers being unilaterally placed in the same new health plan on January 1, 2018 by VEHI (whereas our contract could offer different choices of plans).

- There is also the need to avoid disruption to the day-to-day educational process and athletic events if this impasse drags on for several more months.
- Finally, the Legislature, in its law governing teacher contract negotiations, did not expect school boards to become bogged down in endless, year-round negotiations. A total of 16 meetings between the Board and BEA have taken place to date. The Legislature reasoned that there had to be a way to end the process. Unions can strike and school boards can impose their final offer.

Some wonder why the Factfinder's report did not lead to an immediate settlement. That report, which state law notes is advisory, not binding, for boards and unions, offered some direction forward, although it only took into consideration a few early settlements elsewhere in the state that had little relevance to the unique needs of Burlington students and the economic circumstances of Burlington taxpayers.

The Board has offered salary increases in excess of increases in the cost of living and it has offered health insurance coverage that is comparable to the current high quality plans at a cost to teachers that will be lower than what they are currently paying. If the BEA expresses a willingness to make meaningful movement, the Board is prepared to make some additional movement as well in a continuing good faith effort to achieve a fair and reasonable settlement. We all have common interests in keeping our schools vibrant centers of learning where all are welcomed and all succeed.