

Denver Post

URL: <http://www.denverpost.com/Stories/0,1413,36~53~2296296,00.html>

DPS, teachers set talks

Mediator to be used in wage negotiations

By Allison Sherry, Denver Post Staff Writer

July 27, 2004

Denver teachers union representatives and Denver Public School officials will use a mediator as they try to agree on a pay contract for the upcoming school year.

The two parties will sit down for a 48-hour negotiating session on Aug. 17, the second day of the DPS school year. Since April, the two sides have been exchanging prickly letters and barbs at school-board meetings and in newspaper letters to the editor.

Up until this month, when both sides were asked to have informal breakfasts with middleman Tony Lewis from the Donnell-Kay Foundation, no progress had been made on the negotiations.

"They'd been exchanging whacked communication for months, but they hadn't sat down," said Lewis, executive director of the foundation.

DPS Assistant Superintendent Andre Pettigrew has acknowledged that the district and the teachers need to work on their relationship.

Pettigrew said he is "cautiously optimistic, but I expect to be entirely realistic about the differences."

"Do I think teachers deserve to be paid more? Absolutely, but my job is to provide them with the most competitive market pay without breaking the bank," he said.

Under the district's current offer, all DPS teachers would get a 2.6 percent pay increase next year, which includes a 1.1 percent cost-of-living increase.

The trouble with that offer, union leaders say, is that many teachers would not, in effect, get any raise at all because the cost of health insurance has risen so much.

Teachers haven't received raises in the past two years because of budget shortfalls. But under previous agreements, they had more days off.

The union wants the district to cover regular step increases, as well as the increased cost of health insurance, which will run about \$40 more a month for teachers this fall.

"Teachers have bills just like administrators and just like the district. To go three years in a row without an increase in take-home pay is devastating," said Becky Wissink, president of the Denver Classroom Teachers Association.

DPS teacher Debi Schmuck agreed. She said she feels that every year the district loads additional responsibilities on her without giving her additional compensation.

"The students will be hurt by this," said Schmuck, who will teach seventh grade at Rachel B. Noel Middle School next month.

"If teachers aren't happy, when they don't feel like they're being taken care of, then they don't do their best work."

Outsiders, including Lewis, say they are watching the current struggle between the two groups closely because in March, Denver teachers approved a pay-for-performance salary plan.

Donnell-Kay was among a long list of private groups that funded the pilot to study the idea.

"If you can't agree now, it builds like a snowball. ... This year's contract sets the stage for next year's contract. And next year's contract sets the stage for Pro-Comp (pay-for-performance). And Pro-Comp sets the stage for the future of Denver Public Schools," Lewis said.

Although teachers said yes to the plan, which, among other incentives, would pay them for how well students do on state tests, Denver voters still need to pass a \$25 million tax increase to fund pay-for-performance.

The district will go to voters in 2005 for that money

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