

Attacks by teachers union raise board's ire

BY BETH LOECHLER
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — An audiotape, secretly recorded at a recent Michigan Education Association conference, has incited members of the Grand Rapids Board of Education and led to allegations the teachers' union is bargaining "in bad faith."

On the tape, Grand Rapids Education Association President Paul Helder slams the school board by saying only two or three of its nine members "are capable of some kind of independent thought." The union successfully rid the board of two members during the last election, he said, and "we are planning on taking out another two" this May.

Additionally, an upcoming fact-finding session between union representatives and administrators "is going to be a zoo. That's by design," added Buz Graeber, an MEA representative for Grand Rapids. "The longer the process goes, the longer it will take for them to impose (a contract) on us. We have to stop them from imposing on us."

A Monday morning news conference, called by the administration two hours after parts of the audiotape were released, shows the board — not the union — is the bad-faith negotiator, Helder fired back.

"If we are going to lob hand grenades, I'll say they are bargaining in bad faith because they haven't moved off their position and they are going to impose a contract," Helder said. "What was it that required them to hold a press conference right before the noon news? Nothing."

Teachers have been working without a contract for 18 months.

In light of the protracted talks and the tenor of the comments from union leaders, a nonprofit that advocates for school boards released the tape. It was recorded during an MEA conference in Detroit early this month and anonymously handed over to the Education Action Group, said EAG Vice President Kyle Olson.

"Under no circumstances do GREA leaders appear interested

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PRESS PHOTO/LANCE WYNN

Appalled: Grand Rapids school board President Catherine Mueller speaks at a press conference in the district's administration building Monday morning.

UNION LEADERS UNREPENTANT OVER TAPE

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in reaching an agreement with current school board members, whom they described as 'puppets,' or the Grand Rapids school superintendent, whom they described as the 'stupor-intendent,' Olson said.

The "stupor-intendent" comment was simply reiterated from a Fox News interview with Superintendent Bernard Taylor, which was replayed during the MEA conference, Helder said.

Graeber, however, made no apologies for referring to schools attorney Barbara Ruga as "Babs." "There's nothing derogatory about that," he said.

Taylor, in a statement, said he was "saddened by the tone of disrespect for me personally, the board and our community," and that he focuses on providing "an education of excellence for every child in our district."

Mueller said the taped comments "indicate a pattern of bad-faith bargaining."

Helder and Graeber said they were disturbed that a union member secretly recorded their 90-minute session that focused on negotiations in Grand Rapids. But the conference was for MEA members only so they were well within their rights to talk openly about negotiations, they said.

"We stand behind what we said," Graeber said.

"I feel like the reaction to this has been completely overblown," Helder added.

In the audiotape, the men pointed out they're uncertain whether teachers will be willing to strike if a contract is imposed upon them this summer. Teachers, as public employees, are prohibited by law from striking.

"I can't even get my teachers in Grandville to go picket with them," a conference attendee interjected.

Graeber continued that the bus drivers, who now work for Dean Transportation but are members of the MEA, could legally strike because they are no longer public employees.

The release of the audiotape prompted a closed session of the school board Monday. Afterward, the board released an open letter to the community asking Helder to apologize.

"It is one thing to disagree with civility, it is quite another to act with disregard for the values of our district and community with public statements that are indisputably disrespectful," said board President Catherine Mueller.

District spokesman John Helmholtz said the district's attorney is investigating whether any of the statements on the tape constitute an unfair labor practice.

— Press staff writer Dave Murray contributed to this story.