

GR teachers warn subs not to cross picket lines

UNION BRACES FOR POSSIBILITY OF STRIKE

BY DAVE MURRAY
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GRAND RAPIDS — Grand Rapids teachers are asking substitute teachers not to cross their picket lines should the union call a strike, the most serious sign yet that a work stoppage is possible.

"There is a possibility that we will be forced into a strike," union President Paul Helder said in a letter sent to substitute teachers, who work for a company hired by county schools. "We are asking you to honor our picket lines, should a strike occur."

Helder said Monday the sides have met several times since the Aug. 5 letter was sent and said some of the sessions have been fruitful. But he said members need to be prepared for any possibility.

District leaders are "too focused on the start of school" to be worried about the union's request, the Grand Rapids school district's spokesman said.

Bargainers on both sides have agreed to fact-finding, where a third-party appointed by a state agency gets involved.

An activist group critical of the union said students are ultimately the ones hurt by the union's threatening tone.

"It appears the school board and administration are determined to reform spending and improve education and are willing to withstand such tactics in order to accomplish that mission," said Kyle Olson, head of the Education Action Group. "It is

unfortunate Paul Helder and the other union leaders lose sight of that and, instead, resort to potentially illegal methods to strong-arm the board."

Grand Rapids Education Association members worked last year without a contract, and Helder wrote, "There is no end in sight. The district may impose its will upon us, taking away our rights and benefits that have been in place for decades."

State law forbids teachers from striking, although there have been several job actions without legal consequences.

"We are asking you to reject a call to substitute, if a strike occurs," the letter reads. "You will be called before the district is notified about the strike. We urge you to accept substituting in other districts or simply not work."

District spokesman John Helms said the sides are scheduled to meet again Sept. 8 and are considering hiring an outside auditor to determine the state of the district's finances, as union leaders have questioned the firm contracted by the school board.

"We are too focused on the start of school to get excited about a letter like this," he said. "We would like to give our teachers and all of our employees a raise, but that's just not a fiscal reality at this point. We're working with the union, and we just need to give that process some time."

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