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Rumors of a teacher strike are circulating

By Stacey Tucker

CASS CITY — With rumors flying that Cass City teachers may strike, a Michigan Education Association representative denies there was ever a threat.

Superintendent Ron Wilson said John Folsom, the Michigan Education Association Uniserv Director, made a threat last fall indicating the teaching staff would strike before agreeing to surrender their MESSA health insurance coverage.

The Cass City school board proposed to dump MESSA insurance in favor of less expensive health coverage. Wilson, who said the MEA has taken some questionable actions, decided to contact the Education Action Group about the alleged threat.

"Folsom and I discussed the differences in the board proposed insurance plan and the teachers' preferred MESSA plan," Wilson stated in an EAG press release. "Folsom asked why teachers should accept different health insurance. I responded by asking, 'why should the board pay \$200,000 more than it has for MEA-owned health insurance?'"

"Mr. Folsom's response was, 'The teachers will strike before they will give up MESSA insurance.'"

Folsom, who has been bargaining on behalf of the Cass City Education Association, disagrees and says that conversation has never even taken place.

"That is absolutely incorrect," he said. "That's absolutely false."

"First of all, it's illegal."

The board of education and the Cass City Education Association have been negotiating their contract since March 2008; the contract expired in August 2008.

"They have been working without a contract since last year," Folsom said. "These teachers are some of the most professional teachers I've met."

"It's frustrating when this kind of thing happens."

Wilson also said the union requested a fact-finding hearing. In a conference call with an administrative law judge last February, the fact-finding hearing scheduled date raised a red flag for Wilson.

"Folsom said he wasn't going to be available until July 23," Wilson said. "We became very concerned about this."

"Why would they push the fact finding out until then?"

Wilson said he believes pushing back the hearing to July is a tactic by the MEA to stall negotiations.

Folsom said this idea is incorrect, and the date was set because of availability.

"The fact finder set the date," he said. "Not me."

"My guess is that he's trying to deflect the issues. It's just a bully strategy."

Folsom said he is frustrated at the allegations but doesn't want to call Wilson a liar.

"I respect Ron Wilson, but I think he's confused," he said. "The teachers there have no intent of striking."

According to the release by the Education Action Group, only one public school district has experienced a teachers strike since 1993. Teachers in the Wayne-Westland district in Wayne County staged an illegal four-day walkout last fall.

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