

## Support personnel have new contract; teachers still don't

Friday, October 19, 2007

By Lynn Moore

Support personnel at Holton Public Schools have agreed to a new insurance plan that is at issue in talks over the district's teacher contract, which expired more than four years ago.

The 50 members of the Holton Educational Support Personnel Association recently agreed to a two-year contract that includes a switch to Priority Health insurance, which is expected to save the district \$50,000 per year, said Superintendent John Fazer.

"I think it was a very positive settlement for both groups," Fazer said. "It provided the district with health-care savings and allowed us to pass some of those savings on to staff with wage increases."

Support personnel will receive 2 percent wage increases for each of the next two years. In addition, each member will receive a \$250 bonus for signing the contract.

The district is hoping its 70 teachers also will switch insurance providers, an issue that along with wages, has been a sticking point in contract talks.

"Health insurance and wages are the major issues at this point," Fazer said. "I think the two are intertwined."

Michigan Education Association Uniserv Director Kathleen Maka said working conditions also are at issue in contract talks and that salaries are a major concern of teachers. Maka, who assists the teachers' bargaining team with negotiations, said the highest-paid teachers in Holton earn \$11,000 less than the average teacher salary in the county.

Negotiations with Holton's teachers, who are in their fifth year without a new contract, have attracted the interest of an outside group, the Education Action Group. The EAG recently mailed to 1,000 "likely voters" in the district fliers detailing the costs of insurance options district administrators have presented to the teachers' negotiating team.

Kyle Olson, vice president of strategy for the Muskegon-based EAG, said he is trying to get residents "engaged" in the issue.

"Typically, the community is not engaged because these are tedious issues ... and people just are not interested in school issues," Olson said.

Another 1,000-flier mailing claimed Maka earned a 7.7 percent salary increase last year -- a figure Maka said is false. She said her raise was 2.5 percent, and that she earned more because she was paid for vacation time she didn't use.

The flier compared her increase to the fact that Holton teachers have had no raise since the contract expired five years ago. Olson said he was hoping to reach out to teachers who he believes are not getting their money's worth out of the MEA staff.

"I just want the teachers to think 'What are we getting for our dues?'" Olson said. "Here they've gone half a decade without a contract, without a raise."

Maka, who's been involved with Holton negotiations for about a year, said the fliers are "counterproductive."

"All of this just gets in the way," she said. "This is not going to produce a settlement."

Teachers currently are insured through the "Super Care" plan offered by MESSA, an insurance carrier affiliated with the MEA. According to district information, it pays \$1,320 per month per teacher for Super Care.

In comparison, Priority Health costs \$1,022 per month, meaning the annual savings would be \$250,000 if teachers agreed to switch. Other options include MESSA plans costing \$1,201 and \$1,096 per month and a SET SEG plan costing \$1,115 -- though Maka said SET SEG has not been discussed at the bargaining table.

The district's support personnel had switched from Super Care to SET SEG a year ago, for their contract that expired June 30. That saved the district \$2,500 per employee, Fazer said. SET SEG is an insurance plan started by the Michigan Association of School Boards.

Fazer said administrators believe that Priority Health provides "much better coverage" than SET SEG.

Maka, who also helped negotiate the support personnel contract, said both sides are "very satisfied" with that agreement.

"The agreement was reached in a very amicable manner," she said.