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Board may file complaint over recording

Union president's voice heard on tape

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GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (WOOD) - Grand Rapids Public Schools may file a state labor complaint, calling recorded statements made by the district's teachers union president -- recordings released Monday by an anti-teachers union group -- an example of unfair bargaining.

In the recordings released by the [Education Action Group](#), Grand Rapids Education Association President Paul Helder discussed delaying part of the negotiating process to avoid allowing the district to impose terms and getting more union-friendly board candidates elected.

He also made comments the board construed as promoting a bus driver strike because teachers are not willing to walk out. Helder said in an interview he was simply discussing what might happen in the fall and not speaking of such a strike as a way to get a contract for his members.

This is the second school year during which teachers in Grand Rapids Public Schools are working without a contract.

"There are rules of engagement that are related to labor negotiations and our attorneys believe that those rules of engagement may have been violated," district spokesman John Helmholtz told 24 Hour News 8.

Board members signed a letter Monday afternoon calling for an apology.

Helder said in an interview that the statements were his, made at a state teachers union bargaining conference earlier this month in Detroit, and he stands by them.

The recorded discussion referring to bus drivers included comments from Helder, who pointed out that since the district outsourced busing to Dean Transportation, the drivers "are privatized now. They have the legal right to strike. So that kind of blew up in their faces."

The union president said he doesn't have a way to use that for his members. "I'm not the president of [the drivers union]," he said. "I'm not even a part of their organization."

In the recordings, Helder also advocated delaying the fact-finding process both sides are scheduled to enter to avoid allowing the district to impose contract terms.

"The longer that process goes on, the longer it takes for them to be able to impose on us that has to be done," Helder said in the recorded discussion.

"I don't think it's bargaining in bad faith any more than the board's decision to try to ram through fact-finding so they can impose a contract on us," the union president said Monday afternoon.

The school board is also critical of talk about the school board itself and board elections.



February 23, 2009

2 of 2

"What has taken place is last year we were able to knock two members off the board, and this year we're planning on taking out another two that still will not be enough," Helder said in the recorded discussion.

The board's letter called it a move for union control and financial gain.

"We're a labor union, of course we're going to advocate for candidates that we think are responsible," Helder said.

The recording also includes a reference to Superintendent Bernard Taylor as the "stuperintendent."

When the EAG, the group that released the recordings, bought space on a billboard along U.S. 131 last April, 24 Hour News 8 looked at the group and attempted to determine its funding source.

Secretary Kyle Olson said at the time that the group raises money from people concerned about reforming government spending, but declined to be more specific.

EAG has since filed its required 2007 IRS paperwork. The filing shows EAG took in \$82,263 in "contributions, gifts, grants and similar amounts received" but does not include information about the source of that funding. The group paid Olson \$29,421 plus benefits in 2007. The IRS form 990 lists Jane Missimer as the EAG president and Michael Smith as treasurer.

MEA spokesman Doug Pratt said it was a "shame that this guy (Olson) from outside Grand Rapids is so bent against the dedicated teachers in that town that he secretly records private meetings and posts it on the Internet. I think that says a lot about the character of this guy. This guy is a nuisance and I intend to treat him as such."

The recordings include conversations about West Michigan news reporters. The voice identified as Helder refers to a positive relationship with a newspaper reporter, and another speaker refers to a negative relationship with a reporter from another television station. Mueller said in her statement that the union leadership is "manipulating the media."

24 Hour News 8 and its staff are not mentioned in the released recordings.