



Dist. 211 board, teachers agree on contract

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Surprisingly and suddenly, without the hint of a strike or strife, the Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211 school board on Thursday approved a five-year deal with its teachers.

"This is a very healthy thing for the district," Superintendent Nancy Robb said.

The deal freezes teacher base salaries in the first year and uses the federal urban consumer price index for raises in the remaining four years.

District 211 Union President Jason Spoor said teachers cited recent pay cuts suffered by family members and friends as why they agreed to the base salary freeze in the first year. The teachers worried about how a negative image would affect the district's atmosphere and impede quality education.

"We are really conscious of what's going on in the economy right now and realize we are members of the community," Spoor said.

Two years after drawn-out labor talks brought the state's largest high school district to the brink of a strike, the two sides needed only an eight-hour negotiation session on May 15 to help broker the deal. Based on the CPI-U forecast, the contract will limit base raises between 1 percent to 3.75 percent for the last four years.

The board emerged after an hour to approve the contract with Debra Strauss casting the only vote against. The contract picks off when the last one expires and runs from July to June 2014. The board discussed the contract at two previous meetings.

"I'm very pleased that everyone who was involved in the negotiations was focused on embracing the mission of District 211 and at the same time recognizing the financial challenges that we continue to face," Board President Robert LeFevre said.

Tying teachers' base salaries to CPI-U isn't novel, as District 211 used it for the 2.8 percent base raises teachers received the last two school years. Sides in neighboring Northwest Suburban High School District 214 agreed to use CPI-U for their own five-year deal approved last week.

District 211 and union officials said District 214's talks had no affect on their negotiations. Meanwhile Barrington Unit District 220 officials continue to discuss a new teachers contract.

District 211 teachers will still be eligible for pay increases based on experience for the duration of the contract. The step-increase schedule, which rewards teachers on their level of education and years of experience, remains the same. Other highlights include increases to contributions for health insurance, two additional sick days and two more personal days, as well as continuing tuition reimbursement.

Officials credited the rapport between Robb and Spoor as one of the reasons for the speedier negotiations, a radical departure from 2007 when a federal mediator and public bickering preceded an agreement. This time only four were brought to the negotiating table: Spoor, union treasurer Rich Cortez, Robb and Associate Superintendent for Business David Torres. The strained relationship between the union's past president John Braglia and former Superintendent Roger Thornton snarled previous talks, Spoor added.

The union ratified the deal on Tuesday at a meeting at Palatine High School, although attorneys still need to agree on language to make it official. Spoor said about 80 percent of the 1,300 teachers he represents voted, meaning about 1,053. From that number, 91 percent, or about 958, voted in favor of the contract. That's a higher tally than in 2007, when younger teachers said they felt the contract didn't benefit them as much as veterans. Robb and Spoor also lauded a new negotiating strategy that allowed the two sides to share their goals and results in a shared ownership.

"Basically what you're finding is the union and administration have worked together to support both the education and fiscal priorities of the district," Robb said.

Contract: Teachers union ratified deal Tuesday