

Teachers and school district hope to reach agreement during Monday evening negotiations

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON – More negotiations will be held Monday afternoon regarding the current labor dispute between the Alton School District and the Alton Education Association.

Both parties have posted the latest contract offers on the Illinois Educational Labor Board, which sets the strike timer to as soon as April 25, which would mean a possible teachers' strike could come just before the end of school and even graduation. Alton

Education Association Professional Negotiator Jason Chapman described being asked how such a strike could affect students this summer as “the \$100 question.” This date comes after the teachers' union voted down another contract offer from the district.

According to the public postings, the parties have met six times, and have even included federal negotiation, beginning in Nov. 2017, after teachers had been working without a contract since Aug. 2017. The district presented its fifth, and thus far final, offer on March 6, 2018, through a federal mediator. It was a two-year proposal, allowing certified staff to have a \$100 increase on each cell of the salary schedule as well as a step increase equaling \$1,195 for the 2017-18 school year.

In year two of the most recent proposal from the district, the district offered the same amount for certified personnel. For non-certified staff, the district offered a 35-cent-an-hour raise for both the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years.

This offer was rejected by the Alton Education Association.

The two parties met again on Wednesday, March 21, 2018, and the union requested to speak with the district's lead negotiator to ask what terms the district could extend. This resulted in the district increasing the \$100 increase on each cell of the salary schedule to \$400, with the \$1,196 in step movement remaining the same for each year of the two-year contract. It would also increase the hourly wages of non-certified staff by 40 cents instead of 35.

According to the public posting, this agreement was backed by the Alton Education Association's leadership, which then recommended it passing to its membership. It was voted down by 68 percent on March 22, 2018.



In the concluding remarks of its public posting, the district made the following statement:

Teachers in Alton #11 are deserving of more pay, as are the teachers all over this state and country. The tireless work of our teachers and staff is to be honored, admired and rewarded through a fair salary increase to the best of the school district's ability. Sadly, based upon our current system of funding public education in Illinois, communities can only support salaries that mirror their local tax base. While the State of Illinois is planning the move to utilize an evidenced-based funding formula, it will take years upon years for the district to recover from the debt accumulated over the years due to inadequate funding. Also, as previously mentioned, the amount of additional funding Alton CUSD #11 is expected to see has been reported in varying amounts from \$900,000 to \$1,500,000 under the new funding formula, but the actual amount and timing of payments is yet to be seen. Conversely, the decrease in our CPPRT funds of nearly \$1.3 million will nearly wash away the entire increase even if the highest of the reported amounts is received.

Although teaching salaries in Alton CUSD #11 remain competitive enough with the surrounding area to still attract and hire quality teachers, state and local finances must improve in the very near future. This must occur in order for the district to provide the increases our staff request and deserve while also increasing our average salaries to better compete with those of surrounding downstate districts.

Even though the Board of Education and District Administration believe teachers are deserving of a wage increase for their hard work and their contributions to the success of the School District, the Board of Education cannot agree to a proposal that will place the School District at risk financially. Moreover, the Board of Education cannot agree to any proposal that may cause it to have to further reduce staff or programs or ask the general public to support a referendum as a means to pay for a wage increase. As mentioned, the District is currently operating on cash provided through the issuance of \$10 million in Working Cash Bonds – this is a financial loan/obligation that taxpayers will assume with an increase to the tax rate as a result.

Reducing staff and programs would not be in the best interests of our students educationally, because significant and deep cuts have already transpired over the past seven years. During the past seven years, the District completed over \$6 million in cost reduction measures in the areas of administration, instruction, operations and others.

Unfortunately, the proposals offered by the AEA would cause the School District to continue to deficit spend beyond anticipated future revenues and beyond the Working Cash Bond proceeds. Thus, this would require the Board of Education to reduce staff and programs as a means to pay for these reoccurring wage increases. Ultimately, class sizes would have to increase to unimaginable levels as well as catastrophic program and service losses for students and families.

The Board of Education remains willing to meet with the AEA to discuss any reasonable means of arriving at a contract proposal that allows the District to be fair to teachers and staff while remaining fiscally responsible to the students and taxpayers. Therefore, the District will strongly consider any reasonable offers in an expeditious manner to achieve this end result.

This is disputed by Chapman, who sent the following text message to a reporter from Riverbender.com over the weekend:

Now that the Alton School District has finally received its new funding numbers from the state, we are hopeful that we can reach a fair agreement. The Alton School District is scheduled to receive \$1,497,763 from the Illinois State Board of Education's (ISBE's) new Evidence-Based Funding Formula. This is over \$500,000 more than was originally predicted by the ISBE.

The Alton Education Association is well-aware of the district's financial issues, but this new amount of Evidence-Based Funding money would easily pay for the last proposal of \$800 plus step for our certified members and \$0.40 plus step for our non-certified

members. Bottom line, we've done the math and the district can meet our requests without raising taxes. The district needs to quit attempting to balance the budget on the backs of teachers and support staff.

The data shows rising administrative costs for the past three years, at the same time, educational costs are decreasing. This is unacceptable and shows the district is not putting our students first. Attracting and retaining quality teachers is imperative to a great education.

The will return to the bargaining table Monday, April 16 to try and reach a mutually-agreeable settlement with the Alton School Board so that we can continue to provide the best education possible to all of our students.

Chapman said the Alton Education Association will be hosting another informational picket outside West Elementary School at 3:30 p.m. before the meeting. Such pickets have been held before and after school over the last few weeks in order to alert the public to the cause of the teachers.