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■ 'TIME OUT' WAS CALLED

Union wants CPS talks to resume

By Ben Fischer

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In a move that could re-energize the stalled contract talks between Cincinnati Public Schools and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, the union on Monday demanded an end to a two-week-old "time out" requested by administrators.

"The break the board said it needed should be over," union President Julie Sellers said. "We need to finish things in time for the new budget at the end of June."

Sellers also fired a broadside against the board, which said May 12 that negotiations had failed to produce sufficiently dramatic changes in teacher employment and school scheduling rules, a major focus of the talks. Sellers said the union has addressed every board priority originally outlined.

"Every single one of their priorities were addressed," Sellers said. "We're about 80 percent completed; I hope they're not going to come back with new priorities."

Board Vice President Eve Bolton rejected that criticism, saying the board has been consistent and unanimous in its demands.

On the 12th, Sellers said that any delay past the conclusion of the academic year - Wednesday - would push a final deal into next school year in August because it's impossible to gather all 2,800 teachers over the summer for a ratification vote.

On Monday, Sellers said she thinks the negotiating teams can reach a tentative agreement before June 30, the end of the district's financial year.

Sellers and Bolton said it could be useful to have a tentative agreement to help determine the budget and other aspects of next school year, even if the deal were still subject to a union ratification vote.

CPS Superintendent Mary Ronan said she's ready to resume negotiating with the teachers immediately "if they wish to."

Sellers said: "I just want it on the record that it isn't us holding it up."

Also Monday, the school board voted to move forward on a plan to borrow \$23 million to perform energy-efficiency upgrades in 24 buildings. A state law allows districts to pay back debt by using energy savings realized from more efficient buildings.

The deal is significant because under the energy-upgrade law, the district is not bound to take the lowest bidder to do the work.

Therefore, it will be much easier for CPS to meet its goals for steering work to minority-owned contractors.

CPS has faced withering criticism for failing to meet its minority-hiring goals in its \$1.1 billion school-rebuilding project.