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## CPS, union negotiations heat up

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Long-stalled negotiations between the 2,800-member teachers union and Cincinnati Public Schools heated up last week as the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers lobbed shots at CPS and its board in a letter to the editor

Some board members doubt an agreement will be reached by the groups' Wednesday goal, though the union thinks that's still a possibility.

Wednesday is the deadline for the district to pass its 2010-11 budget. District officials had hoped to be able to factor in any union-related cost savings or increases into that budget.

The longer the negotiations drag out, the more difficult it will be to incorporate any changes during the 2010-11 school year which begins Aug. 18.

If negotiations reach an impasse, an independent party would come in and hash out the contract for them.

The worst-case scenario would be a union strike. The last such strike occurred in 1977. Union President Julie Sellers said the union will not strike.

The negotiations are taking place on a backdrop of a nationwide movement toward public education reform.

Although Ohio law prohibits the sides from discussing details of the negotiations, one issue is "flexibility," according to district officials and board members. Broadly put, the school district wants to be able to move teachers into or out of schools depending on what is most likely to boost academic performance.

Superintendent Mary Ronan also wants each school to have more control over making changes in that building such as the way the school day is structured. The current contract doesn't allow those types of changes, said Ronan.

The union says it is addressing flexibility in its answer to the board's contract proposals. "We did build in a lot of flexibility in schools' staffing. We want it done in a fair way and so that people know what that process is," said Sellers.

The district's lawyer said the district will likely have to give raises in order to get an agreement on those kinds of reforms, said Ronan.

The cash-strapped district doesn't have any money to give.

"It's different when money is tight and you have nothing to offer to get the union to give you the flexibility and reform you need," said Ronan. "But we can't let the status quo be maintained. The public demands change."

Sellers said the union, too, wants change.

"We have made significant progress in recent years," she said in a guest column in Friday's Enquirer, "but more work remains to be done to improve student achievement and graduation rates. For Cincinnati's teachers, the goal is always the success of all students. Whenever reform has been needed, teachers and their union have been part of the solution - not obstacles to change."

The letter lobbed shots at CPS and its school board members saying that they "want to "walk away from the collaborative structures built into (the union) contract."

Board members said that notion is false.

The union also bought radio ads relaying "the background and history of who we are," said Sellers. It bought ad space in the Sunday Enquirer.

The three-year contract between CPS and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers expired Dec. 31. The old contract was extended during negotiations.

The school district declared a time-out in May and negotiations began again earlier this month.

The union thought it had met all of the district's demands.

"It was very frustrating for us to work for six months and the board says 'this isn't transformative enough, we're not accepting it,'" said Sellers.

But the school board and administration wanted more.

"The work product has not produced the kind of transformation that the board feels is demanded by the community or required by our financial situation and that the children deserve - cutting-edge reform," said board member Eve Bolton.

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