

City teachers get contract; hint of shift

Contract

Middle school in discussion

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A negotiated proposal for a new three-year Rochester Teachers Association contract includes a 3.6 percent annual raise, as well as potentially controversial language regarding student discipline and a hint toward yet another reshuffling of grade levels among buildings in the Rochester City School District. The pay increase, retroactive to this entire school year, is based on a formula and was not in question. The more important elements of the proposal address teachers' responsibilities regarding the district's ongoing efforts to improve school climate and discipline. There is widespread agreement the district should rely less on suspensions in handling student misbehavior, but teachers have expressed concern they'll be left without any way to remove unruly students from the classroom so they can teach everyone else.

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Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski

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Most importantly, the proposal states: "Crimes committed in schools will be pursued as crimes committed elsewhere." One of the top priorities of the Task Force on School Climate has been to avoid criminalizing students' misbehavior except in the most serious cases.

"We are no more interested than anyone else in criminalizing student misbehavior, but we're also not interested in coddling criminal behavior," RTA President Adam Urbanski said. "This is setting a floor and separating the two issues. Crimes in school should be no more tolerable than crimes on Main Street."

The proposal calls for joint recommendations on increasing the number of in-school alternative settings for students who misbehave: Alternatives to suspension and inschool suspension rooms, both staffed by certified educators, as well as a support room where students could be connected with social services they need. Each school also would designate one teacher as a behavioral specialist.

The proposal also would establish a committee to consider the question of opening separate middle schools. There are a variety of measures currently in place, but students in grades 6-9 can be in either a primary or secondary school.

In primary schools, 12and 13-year-olds can be disruptive for younger students. In secondary schools, they

can be lost among 18- and 19-yearolds.

“We used to have large middle schools, and they were a disaster,” Urbanski said. “But putting them in elementary or secondary wasn’t helpful either. ... I think there’s an overwhelming sentiment that we would improve the climate in all our schools if we had small — I underscore small — separate middle schools.”

Perhaps the largest barrier to such a plan would be finding and equipping buildings for the purpose. The district and the city now are in the midst of a multibilliondollar capital improvement plan in which standalone middle schools were not contemplated.

There are nearly 6,000 students in grades 6-8 in the district. Urbanski said a middle school should have no more than 400 students, meaning it would take 15 of them to accommodate everyone (although some students and programs surely would be exempt from the change).

School Board President Van White didn’t dismiss the idea but said students deserve a permanent arrangement rather than constant changes.

“We’re kind of schizophrenic; we just seem to go from one organizational approach to the next depending on who our superintendent is,” he said. “I’m not saying going back to middle schools would be an unwise approach, but at some point we need to have some stability in terms of how we arrange our students.”

The RTA proposal would also reinstitute a maximum of five earlydismissal days that teachers could use for collective lesson-planning. Doing away with early dismissal was one of former Superintendent Bolgen Vargas’ proudest accomplishments, but Urbanski said collaborative planning time has been demonstrated to help students.

The district did not respond to a request for comment on the contract proposal. Neither the union nor the school board has given the proposal final approval; that could come next week. Earlier this month, the district’s administrators union got its own new contract, including a 3 percent annual raise.

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From left to right, state lawmakers Mark Johns, R-Webster; Joe Robach, R-Greece; and Harry Bronson, D-Rochester, and Rochester Teachers Association President Adam Urbanski at the lectern, listen to questions and comments from the audience at a rally Thursday.

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