

Mar. 11, 2010
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CONTRACT EXTENSIONS: School Board dismisses critics

Administrators union critical of new perks for five staff members

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LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Clark County School Board members under fire for awarding costly new perks to five executive staff members during an economic crisis are dismissing their critics as "erroneous" and disingenuous.

Terse letters have been exchanged by School Board President Terri Janison and a Clark County School District administrators union official who is calling for a rescission of five contract extensions. They were approved in October for Charlene Green, deputy superintendent for support services; Bill Hoffman, district general counsel; Lauren Kohut-Rost, deputy superintendent for instruction; Martha Tittle, chief human resources officer; and Jeff Weiler, chief financial officer.

Another School Board member seeking re-election this year is attempting to distance herself from the issue. In a March newsletter to constituents, School Board Vice President Carolyn Edwards disavowed any involvement in awarding the new perks.

"Please understand that the reports in the paper about our five confidential employees receiving additional benefits this year that no other administrators received are erroneous," Edwards said in the newsletter. "The additional benefits discussed were awarded in 2006, prior to my joining the board."

But, according to the minutes of the Oct. 7 meeting at which the contracts were considered, Edwards was the board member who made the motion to approve the contract extensions for the five administrators, who answer to Superintendent Walt Rulffes.

Edwards also read into the record changes regarding how executives should be compensated for unused sick leave. That benefit, which entitles the five employees to one day of regular pay for every five days of accumulated sick time upon resignation or retirement, is expected to cost the district more than \$100,000, according to an analysis by the Clark County Association of School Administrators and Professional-technical Employees.

The contract extensions also included five extra vacation days for each of the five employees and the option for them to be paid for 10 unused vacation days each year.

When asked about the October meeting minutes, Edwards said Tuesday that she would have to review the record.

"I think the (School District) staff is preparing a sheet so we can speak to it more clearly," Edwards said of the contract changes. "I would ask you to wait for it."

The controversy over the perks comes as the district deals with a \$77.5 million reduction in state support that is part of a 6.9 percent education funding rollback approved by legislators in a special session.

District officials also anticipate that revenue from local property taxes will be down by \$45 million.

Because of the combination of economic body blows, Rulfes has said the district might face massive layoffs before the new fiscal year starts on July 1.

As of Wednesday, Edwards faces four challengers for her District F seat.

Ken Small, an architect who seeks to unseat Edwards in the southwestern district, said she "got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Now everybody smells cookies on her breath."

He described the claims in her newsletter as spin. "There's no way what she's saying can be true."

Stephen Augspurger, executive director for the administrators union, believes the School Board needs to be reminded to do its job.

"The superintendent works for the board," Augspurger said.

"When the superintendent comes in with select benefits for just a few people, you would like to think that board members, who have been elected by taxpayers to be the guardians and stewards of the taxpayer dollar, would say: 'Tell me, superintendent, how much is this benefit going to cost?'"

Augspurger doesn't think that question was asked by board members before they approved the contracts. "Because if they would have, they would have seen the folly of that decision."

In a March 1 letter to Augspurger, Janison said he is being disingenuous because the union itself is unwilling to make sacrifices and is dragging out negotiations with the district.

Janison said the five executive employees in question were willing to take a furlough day in exchange for the district covering a half-percent increase in contributions for them to Nevada's Public Employee Retirement System.

Augspurger said the five employees' PERS increase will cost more than the savings the district will get from their taking a day off without pay.

He said his union has made numerous concessions, such as giving up an employee retirement incentive, and he blamed the district for prolonging negotiations by appealing a ruling issued by an arbitrator.

Augspurger has called for School Board members to rescind the contract extensions because he does not think they knew what they were doing in approving them.

"Why, in your wildest dream, would you approve those perks unless you had no idea what it's going to cost, what it's going to do to employee morale and the whole issue of fairness?" Augspurger asked.

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