



**DATE:** December 18, 2009

**TO:** Pulaski County special School District Teachers, Parents, and Patrons

**FROM:** Tim Clark, President, PCSSD Board of Education

**RE:** Latest developments with Board/Union Negotiations

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With the large amount of media coverage PCSSD has experienced in the past weeks, I thought it would be helpful to review and clarify what has been in the news. This letter is for all of our teachers, parents, and patrons—to let you know the most recent developments. Some of this you have already heard, and some of this will be new—so please bear with the length of this letter.

We held an emergency board meeting last Wednesday. We did this after receiving calls that some teachers had been advised by PACT to leave their lesson plans on their desks and pack their personal items in preparation of a possible strike. In Wednesday's board meeting, a few things happened that will have a positive impact on students and teachers.

- First, if there is another strike by the teachers' union, substitutes will receive \$100 per day. This will help recruit quality individuals and more of them. We want to make sure we are making every effort to keep our students safe and to ensure learning continues in our schools.
- Second, we agreed to hire 20 permanent, certified substitutes to work in the schools every day. With or without a walkout, these subs were needed. Too many times teachers have to substitute for another teacher, which causes them to lose valuable preparation planning time. Certified subs in the classrooms help ensure teachers get their prep time and students learn. These permanent subs have already been hired and are teaching. This was also a financial decision, because it is simply less expensive to pay for permanent subs than to pay teachers a prorated daily rate of pay for filling in for another teacher. The pool of money that was already allocated for regular subs this school year was used to hire the permanent subs. It has been an issue the board has discussed in the past, and the possibility of a walkout gave us another reason to talk about this and act on it.

We value our teachers. Not recognizing a union as a collective bargaining agent does not take away whatsoever from recognizing how hard teachers work each and every day and how much they are valued. I have children who attend school in the district, and I appreciate our teachers' dedication and sacrifice. That is why—even after we voted to decertify the union—we wanted to give teachers the 2% pay raise and additional insurance benefits. Our decision to decertify was not about the money. Moreover, we want to work together to move this district forward.

I have been asked how teachers can consider a walkout when so many Americans are unemployed. This is hard to understand in a tough economy where jobs are scarce for many people.

Many patrons have questioned how we can give a raise in this economy. (And yes, I am aware that the City of Little Rock is not giving raises this year, and I understand this is the situation with other municipalities and school districts). As you may recall, funding to many state agencies was cut, but K-12 school districts were fully funded for this year. Based on our best financial information, we believed we could give the 2% raise and increase insurance benefits this year. This is exactly what the teachers' union had wanted—and they got it, but they still called a strike.

To answer the many questions about the pay raise, first of all, Arkansas state law requires school districts to give what is known as a step increase to teachers. Some say this is a raise, but this is required by state law, which is tied directly to our teachers' salary schedule. We are proud that it is among the highest in the state. For this school year, teachers received an automatic step/raise increase, which ranged roughly from 2.4% to 3.2% over last year's salaries; there is also something called a "longevity pay," and it was roughly a 2% increase for teachers

who were at the top of the pay scale. We have a salary schedule that we follow. Yes, that does cut into revenue, but we had budgeted for it as we do every year. However, the 2% pay raise to the base salary was not required by state law, but we thought it to be a fair compensation for teachers. The increase in insurance benefits was not required by state law, but we did that also. As I understand it, some districts may choose to give a bonus instead of a raise, which would not permanently raise their contracted salary. One of our board members suggested a bonus rather than a raise, given the uncertainty of our fiscal future that is tied to our state and nation. So to sum it up, based on our pay scale compared to last year, teachers got a 4.4% to 5.2% total pay increase, and those teachers at the top of the pay scale received roughly a 4% total pay increase over last year, following the school board's action of last week.

Along this line of thought, this goes toward part of our reasoning for not voting to ratify the PACT tentative agreement. I also think the board felt it would be hasty to ratify a contract that would lock us in for the next five years. State law does not say a school board must ratify an agreement with a bargaining union. It is important to keep in mind that there are regulations and laws in place that hold our school board accountable for keeping the district in good financial shape. That is part of our responsibility.

There was a lot of pressure from PACT for the board to hurry and ratify a contract that they had been working on for seven months. However, most board members only had a day or two to read it, and we were only given 90 minutes each to spend with our chief negotiator to review changes or ask questions. The proposed contract was for a five year period. I think the union overstepped its bounds by insisting that something be ratified when we only had 90 minutes apiece to review it with our professional negotiator. The tentative agreement I was given to read was 80 pages long. I certainly would not make that fast of a decision on buying a house if I had only seen it for a day or two.

I should say more about the newly hired subs: this is not an additional expense. The PACT president, in her letter of December 15, wrote that the money allocated for these permanent substitutes should have been spent on something else, and that is clearly misleading. As I wrote above, we will spend that money one way or the other due to teacher absences. However, attorneys' fees over the lawsuit initiated by PACT against the district will certainly be an additional expense; these additional expenses for the district and for PACT itself represent money that would be better spent on our children.

We are further disappointed the union has filed a lawsuit against the school district, in spite of what I have discussed in this letter. Contrary to the PACT president's letter, teachers will not be irreparably harmed because the district withdrew recognition of PACT. Both certified and support staff employees will form a personnel policy committee in compliance with Arkansas state law and its many protections, which we already follow. Our teachers will continue to be protected. No more than three other districts out of the state's total 245 school districts are represented by a bargaining union.

The teachers' union may have called a strike to send a message to the school board (nearly 700 teachers walked out on their students), but the overwhelming message received by the board and the public was that the union's focus was not on our students.

Where do we go from here? We don't believe the way the union is negotiating is best for our district and our students. As board members who have varied business experience, we felt it was our duty to be financially responsible and to appropriately manage our district. To approve an 80 page contract without reading it would have been irresponsible. The board wants all parents to know that your children's education is most important to us. It is time to take the attention off the adults and put it back on our children. Teachers, please believe that we know you are the best this state has to offer, and we don't want to lose you; we want you teaching our kids.

Although I appreciate all of your support (phone calls, e-mail, editorials, etc.), this seems to only fuel negative sentiment among union leadership. We have created a special email account for you to direct questions, concerns, and comments related to this issue. Please email me at [TimClarkPCSSD@yahoo.com](mailto:TimClarkPCSSD@yahoo.com).

Thank you and Happy Holidays!