

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## EDUCATION

# Akron school board members optimistic district can reach new contract with teachers

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A day after Akron Public Schools teachers voted overwhelmingly to reject a fact-finder's recommendations on a new contract, Akron school board members said they are hopeful an agreement can be reached with the help of a federal mediator.

The board members did not address aggressive student behavior, which the union says is at issue in the talks.

**APS contract negotiations:** Akron teachers reject recommendations for new labor contract, say 'schools are not safe'

“The reality is our schools are not safe,” union President Pat Shipe said in a news release issued late Sunday.

On Monday evening, the board members voted unanimously at a special meeting to accept the fact-finder's report. The vote came after a closed-door executive session that lasted more than 90 minutes.

Nevertheless, with the teachers' rejection, it will now be up to a federal mediator to help the 20,000-student school district and the union resolve outstanding contract issues.

Before the school board voted Monday, member Derrick Hall said, “This is an unfortunate situation that we're in, where we don't have agreement on this.”

But, he said, “I don't think that means we're not on the same page with regard to what matters most, and that's our students.”

He said he is “very optimistic ... that we are going to be able to come together.”

Immediately after the vote, board President N.J. Akbar said, “We believe that we are all on the same side.”

He said there are “no two sides and the (one) side is our children ... All parties will seek an equitable resolution and agreement.”

Akbar said in a news release issued after the meeting: “Our board finds the report (from the fact-finder) to be fair and reasonable ... Our vote demonstrates our position.”

“We are hopeful we can resolve this soon,” he said in the release.

Shipe, who heads the teachers union, said Monday before the meeting that she does not anticipate talks with a federal mediator to begin before December.

District and union officials will choose a mediator from a list supplied by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.

The roughly 2,900 teachers and other professional — licensed — staff members who are members of the union have been working under terms of the old contract, which expired June 30.

Talks hit an impasse earlier and the two sides agreed to have a fact-finder meet with both sides and come up with the recommendations. Both sides had agreed that should either reject the report, the matter would move to federal mediation.

The teachers reserve the right to strike, which would require a 10-day strike notice.

## **What do Akron teachers and other professional staff members want?**

Shipe has repeatedly said an agreement with the school district prohibits her from discussing specifics of the contract negotiations or revealing what the fact-finder recommended.

But presumably, the union is seeking some kind of change or addition to the contract that details the process for disciplining students for various infractions.

Shipe has previously said current language concerning student discipline is not being followed.

Shipe said Monday before the school board voted that union members understand that student behavior and student violence is a challenging issue.

"We understand it's an uncomfortable issue to talk about, but we cannot afford to let this kind of violence and chaos continue to happen in our buildings every day," she said.

Every 1.5 school days a teacher is physically assaulted, she said. These assaults are ones that have been investigated and verified by building administrators and are then referred to hearing officers by district officials, she said.

A large majority of union members attended Sunday evening's meeting at which they rejected the recommendations on contract language. An exact vote count wasn't released.

Teachers and others who spoke out at the Nov. 7 school board meeting said district officials are not providing the needed leadership as aggressive student behavior increases. Some of the speakers said student learning is being disrupted and a dangerous environment has been created.

The speakers at the board meeting did not discuss specific incidents.

The teachers and the others who spoke had made plans to attend the Nov. 7 meeting prior to an incident a few days before in which a 16-year-old student at Firestone high school was taken to Akron Children's Hospital for non-life-threatening injuries after being stabbed by another student during an altercation in a bathroom at the school.

Felonious assault charges and possible other charges were pending the outcome of an investigation by Akron police.

Last year, union members met with a reporter to discuss various incidents, sounding the alarm over spikes in student violence, including assaults on teachers.

Shipe said then the pandemic made an already bad situation worse.

In 2018, the union demonstrated at a school board meeting, calling for changes in discipline practices.

While contract talks between the union members and district administrators have not been smooth in the past several contract negotiations, teachers have not gone on strike since 1989 — the first and only work stoppage in the district's history. This was after talks with a federal mediator broke down in early January of that year. Schools were closed for nine school days.

Student disciplinary procedures were an issue in the talks, and agreement on a provision setting penalties for specific disciplinary infractions helped to end the strike.

**'Increasingly not safe': Akron schools' staff members say student misbehavior on the rise**

In 1994, a deal on a new pact was not reached until just hours before the start of a new school year. Picket lines already had formed outside the schools when the deal was announced.

Then from 1996 until 2010, a federal mediator, Rob Stein, was brought in to attend bargaining sessions from the start of negotiations.

**Superintendent:** Akron Public Schools review of safety, security measures already underway

William Siegfert, a past president of the Akron Education Association, said in a 2012 opinion piece he wrote for the Beacon Journal that during the time Stein oversaw contract talks, settlements were reached without the parties declaring impasse.