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EDUCATION

Akron Public Schools board members unanimously back contract; teachers set to vote Tuesday

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The Akron Public Schools board voted unanimously Monday night in support of a tentative three-year contract with the Akron Education Association, representing more than 2,700 teachers in the district.

Union members are set to vote as soon as Tuesday, but Monday's school board approval was halfway to making the deal official. About 200 teachers rallied outside the district administration building ahead of the meeting, carrying signs advocating for safe schools and support for teachers.

The contract was a late addition to the board's agenda at the end of the meeting and followed a short executive session. A copy of the contract was not yet available.

The tentative agreement, reached at about 7:30 p.m. Sunday, averted a strike that was set to start at 12:01 a.m. Monday if there was no deal. If there had been a strike, students would have been forced back into online learning for an unknown period of time just after returning from winter break.

"While maybe neither side got everything they wanted, the kids got what they need, and that was their teachers in school today and the students in school today," said board member Valerie McKittrick, who was on the negotiating team. "So thank you everyone for the work, and I'm thrilled our kids were in school today."

Superintendent Christine Fowler Mack said Monday "was a good day" with learning uninterrupted.

"My team and I will now begin the work with staff to implement the agreement in a manner that builds and unites us as one team," Fowler Mack said.

When it comes to school safety, she said, "arriving at an agreement does not lessen our urgency to address the behavior and the needs of our students and to make sure that our staff members feel safe each and every day."

"We know that we must and we can do more, and that we can make positive change together," she added.

The contract includes raises for teachers each of the next three years, in addition to step raises, according to the union's attorney. The district administration dropped its push for more narrow language around what constitutes an assault against a teacher, a point of contention that union officials said was worth striking over by itself.

The administration, which was fighting to keep annual raises in the new three-year contract to 1.95%, 1.95% and 2.1%, settled at 4%, 3% and 3.5%.

The union originally sought 7%-7%-6.25% annual wage increases but offered 5% in each of the next three years after a fact-finder recommended something closer to the low-end offer the administration was pushing for.

On health care costs, the administration agreed to freeze the employee cost of premiums for insurance at their current rate for the duration of the three-year deal.

Akron Education Association President Patricia Shipe, who addressed the crowd outside the building before heading into the meeting, credited powerful public support for gaining a resolution with the board of education.

"What AEA and its members have done is actually get them to listen to people, listen to teachers, listen to parents, listen to the community," she said. "We have got overwhelming support from across the community, from across the state, nationally, and that was what we needed to effect some positive change."

She said school discipline is the No. 1 concern and that community support convinced the board to listen.

"When we sit at the negotiating table and we say that we're listening to people and this is our overriding concern and all these people are telling you, parents are telling you, 'Yes, we agree with the teachers,' and you have community members telling you, 'Yes, we agree with the teachers,' that was powerful at the negotiating table," Shipe said. "We think that moved the needle."

She said the agreement will mean more work needs to be done.

"Now the work starts," Shipe said. "We have an agreement and now we have to put those words into action. We need some short-term solutions that we can implement quickly; we have to sit down and collaborate and develop some long-term solutions that are sustainable. It's not going to happen overnight."

With the union vote scheduled for Tuesday, teachers in the crowd said they had not seen all of the details of the new agreement but were optimistic.

"I think that the association has definitely been heard," said Desiree Smith, an intervention specialist at Firestone Park Elementary. "I feel fantastic. They've done a really good job during this long, long process. We will have to wait until we see the whole substance of what they're offering us, but so far it looks really good."

Kaley McKee, a first grade teacher at Firestone Park, also said she looks forward to seeing the details of the new contract.

"We put our faith in AEA, so we're hoping that if they felt they were comfortable making the deal then we're comfortable with the deal."

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