

The Palmerton Area School District and the Palmerton Area Education Association (PSEA Teacher's Union) met Friday evening in an attempt to resolve the bargaining impasse for a new collective bargaining agreement in the hopes of avoiding a strike. At the meeting the mediator suggested a new approach to developing the salary matrix. The District agreed with the idea and offered the proposal, but the Association walked away from the table and left the building without notifying the District. Instead the Association sent notice through the mediator that not only did it reject the District's offer, but also that it refused to make any new offers before the strike. Thus the District was provided an ultimatum by the Association: accept our demands, which have not changed since the outset of negotiation, or we are going on strike.

Prior to this meeting, the Association had increased their demands and length of its contract by two years. At Friday's meeting the Association acknowledged that its previous offer was more expensive and regressive, so it rescinded the two year add-on. The current Association offer on the table consists of the same salary offer the union had made at the outset of negotiations: 3%,4%,4%,and 5%, totaling a 16% increase over 4 years. As to health care, the current demand is more expensive than the union's original demand. The Association had sought a health care plan to reduce costs that contained a \$350/700 deductible and modest co-pays. However, this plan offered by the Association was controlled by a trust where the District would lose the ability to bargain changes in the terms. The District mirrored the plan and offered the same terms but without the union-controlled trust. Even though the two plans were essentially identical, the Association rejected this and placed a more expensive plan on the table as its counter demand. The counter is simply their current high-cost plan devised in 2012 which has a \$200/400 deductible, freezes in the meager premium share payments for two years, and a \$5.00 increase in premium per pay period for the remaining two years. This offer would net the District a significant higher expense than it currently pays and would cause a funding shortage, especially in conjunction with the Association's rich salary demands.

The District, at Friday's meeting, agreed to the mediator's suggested salary matrix that reduced/eliminated the \$12,000 jump step, and more evenly distributed the money throughout the matrix. This was done solely to make a concession in order to avoid a strike. The District believes its current offer of raising the starting salary to \$50,000, providing every member, regardless of years of service, a 3.25% increase for each year of the contract, and a \$1,500 stipend for attaining a master's degree is more favorable for both union membership and the taxpayers.

The Association has said that it remains committed to bargain anytime, anywhere. Yet it has repeatedly walked out of the building without notice to the District's bargaining team, as it did Friday evening. It has now announced that it will not agree to a single concession or change in plan prior to the strike. Its actions belie its commitment. In fact the Association has already announced that it refuses to meet with the intent on reaching an agreement: the very definition of good faith bargaining.

Based on the Association's action and response Friday evening, the District team believes that it could have done nothing but completely concede to the Association's demands to avoid the impending strike. As this team has committed, it will do everything in its power to avoid the strike short of agreeing to terms that neither the District nor the taxpayers could afford. The District's bargaining team feels that it has fulfilled its pledge to the community, and that the fate of Palmerton student education this year is now solely in the hands of the teachers' union.