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Schools contract talks hit snag

Teachers want pay for longer day

By **Stephanie Ebbert** | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 24, 2011

Nearly 15 months after their last contract expired, the Boston Teachers Union and Boston public schools find their negotiations stalled over whether teachers should be compensated for working a longer day and rewarded based on their performance, rather than seniority.

Both sides have agreed in principle on extending classroom time by a half-hour - a proposal school officials had hoped to start this year and will have to postpone at least until next fall. But the school department is unwilling to offer additional pay, saying that the six hours elementary students spend in the classroom pales in comparison to their charter school counterparts' eight-hour day.

"The big beef between the parties is that they would like us, BPS, to pay teachers for an additional half-hour," said Michael Goar, deputy superintendent. "What we're saying is we're willing to pay teachers, but not based upon overtime rate. We'll pay them based upon student performance."

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But with criteria for teacher performance evaluations still unclear - and with concern about subjective reviews - the union president said teachers should be paid for the work they are doing.

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“Our teachers already work additional hours every day in class preparation,” said Richard Stutman, union president. “These teachers have their own children in day care, have after-school needs that they must comply with, and to delay them at the end of their day costs them money or time. We’re just looking to break even on that.”

The two sides are expected to come out swinging this week at national education conferences in Boston, where they will rekindle their arguments and seek to bolster public support.

Boston schools Superintendent Carol R. Johnson and Randi Weingarten, American Federation of Teachers president, will appear tomorrow at a conference that will highlight how more time in the classroom, when used well, can increase student achievement.

Then, Weingarten will appear at a news conference to denounce the Boston schools for balking at paying teachers for working a longer day. The Boston union is affiliated with the federation.

“What really shocked me about Boston is that the superintendent is actually asking teachers not to do more with less, but out and out subsidize the work the schools should be doing,” Weingarten said in a phone interview last night. “The notion that unlike any other profession, teachers should just subsidize everything we should be doing for kids is mind-boggling to me.”

Weingarten said she supports the idea of extending the school day, but the time must be structured appropriately and teachers compensated.

“I know times are tough. Everybody knows times are tough,” she said, pointing to teachers around the country who have taken wage freezes, furlough days, and moderate packages in recent years. “But this is different when one demands that teachers essentially subsidize a whole new program for a school system.”

Beginning Wednesday, Boston Public Schools is hosting the annual conference of the Council of the Great City Schools, including a Friday national town hall meeting specifically focused on labor-management relations.

The Boston Teachers Union has sought a three-year contract that calls for wage increases of 2 percent in the first year, 4 percent in the second year, and 4 percent in the third year.

The school district has proposed a four-year contract that would boost teachers' pay 1 percent in the first year, none in the second, and 2 percent in each of the following two years.

In addition to extending the school day, the district wants to scrap the additional automatic salary boosts teachers get for their years of service and levels of education that they attain. Instead, Goar said, it wants to award raises based on performance - taking into account student test scores, student progress, and other factors.

Stutman said the proposal was so vague as to be meaningless.

The contract covering some 6,300 teachers and paraprofessionals expired in August 2010 and employees have been working under the old terms since. The two sides have met roughly 35 times. At this point, no further talks are scheduled.

Contract reform has drawn support from education think tanks and advocates, including the Boston Foundation and Boston United for Students, a coalition of some four dozen community groups and business-driven organizations seeking to reduce the achievement gap through major contract reform.

"There's an urgent need for fundamental change in the contract to improve student performance, and the city doesn't have the dollars to just buy it," said Samuel R. Tyler, president of the Boston Municipal Research Bureau, which is a member of the coalition.

Tyler pointed to competition from growing charter schools.

"We have to make the Boston schools more attractive to the parents and students, 'cause otherwise we're going to see more of an exodus of students to charter schools."

The longer school day, in particular, has been championed by groups such as Massachusetts 2020, the educational policy group founded by entrepreneur and former Democratic political candidate Chris Gabrieli.

School officials also seized on that charter school competition in making a case that Boston students need more time in the classroom.

“Our view is that our kids deserve more time on direct instruction,” Goar said. “In light of our test scores, we just cannot have six hours as a main way for instruction.”

Similar arguments arose this year in Chicago, where Mayor Rahm Emanuel, even before he took office, pressed teachers to work a longer day, saying Chicago children spend less time in the classroom than their counterparts in Houston, Los Angeles, or New York.

When the union in Chicago balked, the mayor and the school department offered individual schools extra funding and teacher bonuses, leading 13 schools to enlist in the effort. But a state labor board sided with the union this past week and asked the courts to stop the schools from negotiating with principals, offering incentives to teachers, or unilaterally modifying a contract.

Weingarten is expected to address the push for longer classroom days in her remarks tomorrow.

“She’s an extremely well-regarded spokesperson of the educational reform movement and she doesn’t see anything inconsistent with paying people when you’re asking them to do additional work,” Stutman said. “It doesn’t make it more of a reform to exploit people.”