

Strikes few and far between in school districts so far

Just two school districts have faced strikes this year, but neither lasted long, with the use of federal mediators. A strike of 628 employees, most of them teachers, in **Danville District 118** was launched on Sep. 13 and settled on Sep. 16. An earlier strike involving 269 certified & non-certified employees in **Mahomet-Seymour CUSD 3** began on Aug. 19 and was settled the following day.

As of early October, there were no strikes in progress, although two school districts had received a notice of intent to strike. Seven other districts had already settled contract disputes.

The Danville strike settlement came in a seven-hour bargaining session, the first session the two sides had held after union members went on strike over salary issues three days earlier. The union, which represents about 400 certified staff and about 200 noncertified staff, had been working under its previous one-year contracts, which expired on June 30.

District 118 officials said they

needed to take a financially conservative approach to negotiations due to the unstable economic climate and the uncertainty of state funding, which makes up about 51 percent of the Danville district's revenue.

In Mahomet-Seymour, the board approved a one-year contract with a 2.6% raise (step + .5%) for teachers, 3.5% (step + 1%) for aides and 3.5% for other support staff. The teachers organization had rejected the district's offer for a two-year contract with salary increases of more than two percent for the first year... and just over three percent for the second. The union had proposed a 5-percent raise in the current year and 6-percent the next.

A strike was narrowly averted by last-minute negotiations with teacher representatives and a federal mediator in the newly formed **North Mac CUSD 34**, Girard. A total of 169 certified and non-certified staff had filed an intent-to-strike notice on Sep. 22, but the two sides reached a two-year agreement in Sunday night bargaining on Oct. 3. Health insurance was

said to be a key sticking point.

Another strike was averted one day earlier in **Evergreen Park District 124** when negotiators approved a two-year contract that includes a total pay raise of 4.75 percent for teachers. The agreement calls for 205 teachers and support staff to get a 2.25 percent raise this school year. Teachers would receive a 2.5 percent raise in the 2011-12 school year, while support staff would get a 3 percent increase that year. The agreement came two weeks after teachers had filed notice of intent to strike.

The list of other recent contract settlements includes:

- **Harmony Emge SD 175:** 54 IFT/AFT certified teachers. Notice filed Aug. 20; Settled Sep. 1.
- **Illini Bluffs CUSD 327:** 65 IFT/AFT full and part time faculty. Notice filed Aug 2; Settled Aug. 10.
- **Waukegan District 60:** 1,250 IFT/AFT certified staff employees. Notice filed June 21; Settled Sep. 9.

Source: Illinois Association of School Administrators: <http://www.iasaedu.org/>.

Koch urges caution, fiscal restraint on negotiations, finances

Christopher Koch, state superintendent of schools, is extending his message of caution and fiscal restraint in regard to school finances – a message he has offered to school board members and superintendents for more than a year.

“Be careful with raises because you don’t know what the future holds,” Koch told those assembled in Fairbury for IASB’s Corn Belt Division dinner meeting on Oct. 14. Koch said raises now may also send the wrong message to the public and legislature.

“Some legislators have implied that there’s enough money for schools because teachers get raises,” he said. What lawmakers aren’t taking into consideration is that most contracts are not renewed annually. A district may be contractually tied to salary increases for decisions made two or

three years ago when finances were much better.

Boards looking at contract negotiations should work with IASB and other education associations “to keep lines of communication open,” he said.

In other remarks, Koch said the state’s unsuccessful quest for “Race to the Top” funds this summer actually took Illinois in a positive direction by helping to get some necessary reforms passed and to adopt new common national standards for language arts and math.

“We’re comparing kids to those in other states and other countries,” he said. “Why not have common standards?”

Illinois is among 40 states that have joined in the national standards movement and one of 27 states working on a common national assessment

for those new standards. The assessments, to be given online for quicker results, will be true course assessments, he added, not just a snapshot.

In answer to audience questions, Koch said the U.S. Department of Education is “encouraging” a longer year or longer school days but is not likely to mandate such a move soon.

In regards to the federal jobs money that is being distributed, he said ISBE has posted guidance in a Q&A format on its website. While districts are being encouraged to spend the money sooner rather than later, they do have two years within which to spend the money.

Koch thanked the board members for the leadership and diligence, adding about the current financial situation, “I wish I could reassure you it’s not going to get worse.”