

Dear editor,

The Redbank Valley School District Negotiations Committee has continued to work toward a contract settlement with the district's teachers and support staff. We recognize these individuals' value, appreciate their work on behalf of our students, and wish to fairly compensate them. In doing so, we insist on maintaining annual expense increases that can be matched by annual tax increases, in order to keep a balanced budget and not necessitate further program and position cuts.

We insist on one time grant monies to be used for one time expenses and not to justify recurring expenses. Grant money from federal COVID-19 relief and an unexpected budget surplus from last school year are temporary and related to the pandemic. Their occurrence cannot derail our efforts to limit recurring expense increases to the amount of recurring tax revenue that can be generated.

To this end, we have told the teachers that we would be willing to provide them with a \$2000 signing bonus along with a 2% salary raise for each of the next three years, and we have told the support staff that we would be willing to provide them with a \$1800 signing bonus along with a \$0.40/hr, \$0.42/hr, and \$0.42/hr raise for each of the next three years respectively. Salaries for the past two years would remain frozen for both groups in lieu of no healthcare insurance changes for those years. The teaching staff has responded by requesting 2.5% annual raises for all five years, a prospect that would not permit a balanced budget in the end.

Moving forward, regarding health insurance, we have asked for all employees to start having copayments, with amounts such as \$20 for an office visit and \$125 for an ER visit, and we have reduced the amounts from our prior offers. However, our employees are only willing to agree to much fewer copayments. We have also proposed reducing by ten percent the district contribution to employee's health savings accounts, funds which are used to cover healthcare deductibles. This reduction could be regained by employees who participate in a wellness program, and additional health saving account contributions from the district can be gained through not using sick days.

We have indicated a willingness to use a portion of the district's fund balance and recent grant dollars to help settle the contract. Namely, the aforementioned signing bonuses and a proposal to pay teachers for additional professional development days have been suggested. Unfortunately, the teachers have insisted that any additional paid professional development days not be mandatory, which negates their value when the goal was to gather small groups of teachers for team meetings in hopes of improving academic outcomes. They have also rejected the signing bonuses in favor of higher salary raises, which would eventually undo the balanced budget.

Even more regretfully, the Association has again indicated the potential for a strike. The school board's negotiations committee wishes to let the students, parents, and community know that we have endeavored to avoid a strike by increasing the salary and bonus amounts, decreasing the copay amounts, and providing opportunities to gain additional health savings account contributions from the district. We feel that we have done what we can to avoid a strike and yet still set the district up for a balanced budget well into the future. The public should speak to school board representatives and district employees alike with their opinions and suggestions on these crucial community matters.

Sincerely,

Chad Shaffer
Redbank Valley School Board Negotiations Committee Chair