

Eastchester teacher contracts approved in 6-3 vote

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At its regular board meeting on Tuesday night, the Eastchester Union Free School District voted 6-3 to approve an amendment to the 2006-2011 collective bargaining agreement for the district's teachers, the product of three weeks of negotiations between the school board and the Eastchester Teachers Association (ETA).

The contractual raise for the 2010-2011 school year had been set at a 3.55 percent increase; the renegotiation will result in an average 2.75 percent increase for the upcoming school year, split over two semesters, for a savings of \$235,000 in this year's budget.

Eastchester Superintendent of Schools Marilyn Terranova also pointed out that, due to the nature of compound interest, the reduction in the rate of increase would continue to provide savings going forward. "This money is disappearing from the base salary," she said. "This is a forever savings."

In addition to the renegotiation for the upcoming fiscal year, the contract extension includes an average raise of one percent in 2011-2012 (also split over two semesters) and a flat raise of two percent throughout the entire 2012-2013 school year. The contractual raises would be in addition to increases associated with the district's 17-level "step" program, which has built-in annual raises for teachers who remain in the district year after year.

On top of the amounts approved in last night's contract vote, teachers still eligible for the step program will receive an average of 3.2 percent in step-related increases in 2010-2011. By 2012-2013, the last year of the newly extended contract, that figure will drop just below two percent.

Terranova explained that while upstate school districts have a standing policy of including rates for step increases in contract negotiations, such a move would represent a great shift in lower Westchester, one that would require much more time than that allotted by the three weeks of negotiation used to come to the most recent agreement.

"It is a huge systemic change that is so foreign to everybody it would take a lot more discussion," said Terranova, who said that a typical contract negotiation usually takes between six and 14 months.

Rhonda Homes, president of the Eastchester Teachers Association (ETA), addressed the group's decision to reopen the contract. "We were willing to adapt to the current economic realities in pursuit of the finest educational program possible under the present circumstances," said Homes. "It was the right thing to do and a majority of our members felt the same way." The ETA membership also voted to approve the agreement on Tuesday, not long before the Board of Education met and did the same.

“We got a very good deal here,” said Trustee Mary Messner Martin, a recent board appointee. “I think it’s a dramatic first step, and I’m going to support it.”

Supporters and opponents of the new contract both recognized the fact that teachers had willingly agreed to a revision to raises that were due to them under the law.

“The teachers were under no obligation to come to the table and open the contract,” said Trustee Michelle Simon Kissel.

Paul Doyle, the board secretary, Vito Catania and Robert Summer voted against the agreement.

“When I look at the numbers themselves, I know this is a very positive step,” Doyle said while he announced his intention to vote against the plan. “I don’t know this is the right step.” Catania framed his opposition around his identity as “a fiscal extreme conservative,” arguing that additional savings should have been sought.

“I really applaud the members who did not support it,” said Renée Marsh, a co-founder of Citizen Advocates for Responsible Education in Eastchester (CARE). “Just look at the budget, and the 800 pound gorilla is salaries...they’re willing to cut everything and yet preserve what should be cut, which is salaries.”

Bill O’Leary, who attended Eastchester schools but has no children in the district, expressed disgust at what he considered to be “token” givebacks.

“I think the public has absolutely no idea what’s in these teachers’ contracts and the various avenues by which they make money in addition to their base salary,” said O’Leary. “I think they [the board members] had a great bargaining opportunity here that they pretty much gave away.”

Other opinions from community members on the contract’s passage were less clear-cut. “It is a gesture of goodwill,” said resident George Winn of the decision by the ETA to negotiate. “I think that it was necessary; whether it will be sufficient or not, we’ll see.”