

The School Board of Community High School District 117 and the District 117 Education Association have recently approved a contract extension. The new contract reduces costs significantly and positions District 117 to better weather the financial crisis in Illinois.

For the past two years, District 117 reduced its budget by \$800,000 and \$1.3 million respectively. The current budget plan for the 2011-12 school year reduces expenditures by more than \$1.5 million. With the State of Illinois owing the district over \$2.1 million, the continuing uncertainties of funding in the future, and low consumer price index, the administration and the Association agreed to open contract discussions beginning this past fall.

While the current collective bargaining agreement was not set to expire until June 20, 2012, talks between association leadership and school administration have been occurring since last summer. Last July, the Association agreed to freeze all non-teaching stipends until the current contract expires in June, 2012. These negotiations saved the district nearly \$100,000 over two years. The talks continued regarding the long-term financial health of the district. Both sides agreed that substantial change would have to occur to ensure that the district remained financially sustainable while maintaining the integrity of the classroom and offering as many extra-curricular opportunities as possible for the students.

“It is great to see two sides continue to meet and discuss the health and well-being of an organization outside the traditional negotiations that occur every three or four years. The current contract, signed in 2008, was already in place for next year. For both parties to see past this and examine the long-term position of our organization says something about our shared values, vision, and mutual trust,” said District 117 Co-Superintendent Mike Nekritz.

The results of this ongoing dialogue proved positive. The Association has agreed to forgo its contractual 5% raise for next year and replace this with a salary freeze for all teachers and support staff during the 2011-12 school year. The contract will be extended an additional two years with subsequent minimal salary increases in 2012-13 and 2013-14. This agreement will save hundreds of thousands of dollars for the district and bring additional stability to both the Association and the district.

“The third year of cuts has seen the administration and Association work together to extend the collective bargaining agreement, prior to its expiration, in an effort to keep some programs intact, continue to put the students first, and avoid the upheaval seen around the state and country,” said Business Manager Jennifer Nolde.

The new contract also streamlines professional development, clarifies language about retirement, and shares future savings from a new attendance clause with staff members and the district.

The Board of Education is very happy that the Education Association of District 117 and our Administrative Leadership Team had respectful, constructive dialog, early in the year, and came to a mutual agreement of concessions that not only helps preserve important academic programs and jobs in the next few school years, but also demonstrates to our taxpayers that they are very sensitive to the economic condition of the entire country,” says School Board President Wayne Sobczak.

District 117 Education Association President Charlie Trout added, “By agreeing to open the contract, not only did we save money that would protect jobs for staff and programs for students, we also avoided the traditional costs associated with formal negotiations.”

While the new contract does not solve the financial challenge facing District 117, it does provide some real and important flexibility. It also demonstrates the importance of trust, teamwork, and collective sacrifice. These are tremendous lessons for everyone, especially the students enrolled at District 117.