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February 10, 2016

To the Editor, The Ridgewood News:

At our February 8 Board of Education meeting, our teachers voiced concerns about the unsettled contract and the Board's recent proposal. It was evident that the information they were given about the Board's proposal was incorrect.

The Board and the Ridgewood Education Association Negotiations committees have met 12 times since February 2015. Unfortunately, we have failed to settle the contract. On Wednesday, February 3, a hearing was held before the state appointed Fact-finder. At the hearing, the Board summarized its position and the current proposal in a memorandum. The bullet points below highlight the key areas discussed in our memorandum. The full memorandum can be found on the District's web site at www.ridgewood.k12.nj.us.

Key areas in the Board's Fact-finding memorandum:

- The Board has based its negotiating position on the realities of a state law, Chapter 44, which limits local school boards to annual property tax increases of no more than two percent over the previous year's dollar amounts, with some limited exceptions.
- Ridgewood teacher salaries are at or near the top of salaries paid for similarly qualified staff in other Bergen County school districts.
- The Board currently spends over \$7 million per year, or approximately 74 percent of the premium bill, for REA health benefits. The Board has not proposed to increase the teachers' share of the health benefit premiums.
- Health benefit premiums have increased on average by 10 percent annually for the past 10 years.
- The Board has proposed changing the health benefits plan within the current provider program (the School Employees Health Benefits Plan) to one with higher co-pays -- \$10 doctor visit copay in the current plan rising to \$15 per primary care doctor visit and \$25 for specialists -- as a way to save both the District and teachers on premium costs.
- Breakage, or any savings due to retirements, is not a reasonable way to fund a settlement. Historically, the Board has spent any such savings on new hires or on salary increases for existing teachers as they complete graduate courses and higher education degrees.
- State aid for rapidly rising special education costs has decreased in the last three (3) years.
- The District's architect and engineering firm completed a facility review and recommended facility upgrades/repairs of approximately \$40 million. The capital reserve account balance as of June 30, 2015 was \$1,018,989, far short of what is needed to update our 11 buildings constructed between 1894 and 1965.

Many of the comments from teachers were critical of the Board and mischaracterized us as uncaring and indifferent. The Board values our staff. We would never see our teachers as “numbers on a spreadsheet.” We are well aware of the work our staff does and that it is this work that makes Ridgewood the excellent district that it is. The Board is committed to negotiating a fair contract with the REA that can be funded within the District’s financial ability.

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