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March 2, 2016

Dear Editor, Ridgewood News:

The Board of Education is committed to communicating accurate information related to contract negotiations with the Ridgewood Education Association (REA). Laura Grasso's letter to the editor last Friday was significantly misleading. Here are the facts.

- The Board has modified its contract proposals several times in the last year and on January 20 and again on February 29 we offered higher salaries, withdrew proposals related to additional time, and modified our healthcare proposal.
- The REA's latest proposal would reduce their healthcare contributions by over \$2.1 million over a new 3-year contract. Accepting such a proposal would require the Board to make significant cuts in other areas of the budget.
- Teachers currently contribute 25.7 percent of the cost of their healthcare premiums and the district pays 74.3 percent. The Board has offered to adjust the individual percentage contribution rates as long as the net contributions continue to equal 25.7 percent of the healthcare premiums.
- In 2012 the Board reduced healthcare costs by changing to the state health insurance plans. The Board shared these savings with the REA by increasing their salary 2.75 percent each year for the last three years.
- The change in the health insurance plan recently proposed by the Board for the new contract compares favorably with plans offered in the private sector with copays of \$15 for primary and specialist doctor visits.
- The REA contends that the Board has \$3.5 million to fund the contract settlement. This is untrue. The \$3.5 million is a number calculated by the REA and the NJEA for their Fact-finding submission. We believe that it fails to account for both the revenue and the expense sides in specific budget areas.
- Our teachers are among the highest paid in Bergen County. The Board recognizes the importance of competitive salaries to attract and retain talented and highly qualified teachers.
- NJ law, Chapter 44, limits the Board to annual property tax increases of no more than 2 percent. While the law allows for limited waivers to provide small tax increases above 2 percent, the Board is reluctant to further burden Ridgewood taxpayers.

- The fact that four of the Board members do not have children in our schools does not lessen our commitment to our students and staff. Our children graduated from Ridgewood High School. We are acutely aware of the quality of our schools and grateful for the education they received.

To continue our “tradition of excellence” our district must be financially sound. We cannot commit to salaries and benefit costs that exceed what the district can afford. To clearly understand the Board’s position, the public is invited to review our Fact-finding memorandum posted to the district’s website at www.ridgewood.k12.nj.us.

The Board will continue to conduct our negotiations with genuine respect for our staff. We want to settle the contract with the REA and move forward in a positive manner.

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