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To the Editor, Ridgewood News:

Mr. Mike Yannone, Ridgewood Education Association (REA) president, made several erroneous statements at the September 21st Ridgewood Board of Education meeting that warrant response.

A \$2.5 million tax burden is being placed on teachers. It is not a tax. State law known as "Chapter 78," phased in over 4 years, requires that all public employees contribute towards their health benefits. The \$2.5 million is the sum of this year's contribution.

The Board passed a resolution to remove collective bargaining rights for teachers and did not provide it to the public. Last March, the Board approved a resolution asking that Chapter 78 be excluded from negotiations. This resolution was posted on the Board and Superintendent's web pages at www.ridgewood.k12.nj.us within 24 hours of the Board approving the meeting minutes.

Contract negotiations are stalled due to a highly paid RBOE attorney spokesperson. The RBOE has included an attorney on its negotiating team for over 15 years. He is an experienced, reasonably priced attorney. The REA's negotiating team includes a NJEA representative. The REA collects over \$650,000 annually from its members. Some of this money is used to pay NJEA for this service.

The settlement of the contract is not the top Board goal. This is untrue. On September 21, 2015 the RBOE approved a goal "to negotiate with the REA to settle a new contract." It is a priority for this year.

The district says its financial hands are tied, which is disrespectful to teachers. The District's annual budget is capped at 2% on the amount the tax levy can be increased. Law mandates this and it is the reality under which we operate. Disrespecting our staff is not part of the equation. We honor and appreciate the fine work of our staff.

Each year the Board hires new administrators who are doing less work. In 2008, the Board was forced to reduce administrative positions when all categorical state aid was cut. Over the last three years we have rebuilt our administrative team. We have reinstated 5 administrators and added 33 teachers. Every staff member - administrators, teachers and support staff - are doing more work, not less.

Mr. Yannone asked *if the RBOE was going to Atlantic City again at taxpayers' expense.* Yes, the Board of Education will attend the NJSBA workshop in October. Board members are the only NJ elected officials legally required to receive training. Workshop provides this training and opportunities to learn about best practices and hone leadership skills. The district pays for registration and accommodations.

The Ridgewood Board of Education (RBOE) has high regard for our talented teaching staff and secretaries. The partnership with our teachers is a longstanding one that values their input in improving education for our students. In negotiating a contract, the Board is mindful of the financial reality and tasked to balance this reality with the need to fairly compensate our teachers.

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