

Teachers propose eliminating 31 jobs to improve their pay in Forest Lake

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In a highly unusual move, teachers in the Forest Lake School District have proposed eliminating 31 of their jobs next year.

The local unit of the Minnesota Education Association, the bargaining agent for the district's 406 teachers, proposed at a negotiating meeting June 18 that the jobs be sacrificed in exchange for better pay.

Chief negotiator Jim Lindstrom said a survey of the Forest Lake teachers showed 80 percent support eliminating the jobs even if it means larger class sizes.

"We don't like having larger class sizes", he added. "But we are willing to accept them."

Teacher association representatives and labor experts say it is rare for unions to propose staff cuts.

"I don't know of any place in the state at any time in the last 20 years that has made such a proposal at the table," said Charles Cole, staff representative for the Minnesota Federation of Teachers. "It could be that you negotiate a settlement and that the school board in its wisdom sees that it will have to lay off people the following year. But that is a different thing."

Lindstrom said his group took the initiative this time with the aim of diverting funds saved from elimination of jobs into salary increases for the remainder of the teachers.

Donley Johnson, the district's director of personnel, said neither the administration or school board has yet to take an official position on the teachers' proposal.

Superintendent Gerald Brynildson was unavailable for comment Monday. But Johnson said Brynildson is cool to the idea because it might hurt the quality of education.

Lindstrom, meanwhile, argued that Forest Lake teachers are grossly underpaid in comparison with teachers in Minnesota's 16 school districts with enrollments from 5,000 to 10,000 students.

He said that based on statistics compiled two years ago, the 16 districts' average annual teacher costs,

including salaries and fringe benefits, was \$50,089. The Forest Lake district ranked 15th, at \$42,505 per teacher.

Other districts can afford to pay more he said, because their voters have in most instances approved exceeding state-imposed tax levy limits. But Forest Lake District voters overwhelmingly rejected an extra levy in November 1989.

"The taxpayers in the community said they were unwilling to go into their pockets for an extra \$200 to \$500 a year to support education," Lindstrom said. "But we still keep providing the same number and types of education programs as other districts."

As a result, he said, each Forest Lake teacher subsidizes these programs by working for \$3,000 to \$8,000 less per year than their colleagues in districts of similar size.

"Even by cutting 31 people, that won't put us near the top," Lindstrom said. "But I guess that all we are saying is we want to be average."

Charles Kehrberg, a negotiations specialist with the Minnesota Education Association, said that the Forest Lake unit is acting on its own in proposing the staff cuts.

"Each local association is autonomous," he said. "They have the ability to do what they want. The state organization tries to give each local guidance and information, and that is all."

Mario Bognanno, professor of industrial relations at the University of Minnesota, also said it is very unusual to hear of union proposing staff cuts.

"It creates division within the ranks, and most labor organizations like to maintain as much harmony as possible," he said. "In a sense, you could say this is a selfish move. On the other hand, one might argue this is in the interest of the school district as a whole and not a bad idea."

A potential benefit, he said, might be an improved salary schedule that helps to keep some of the best, most experienced teachers.