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Palmyra-Eagle schools cut two teachers

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PALMYRA - With shaky voices and downcast eyes, Palmyra-Eagle Area School District Board of Education members voted Tuesday to not renew the contract of Erin O'Hara, the district's elementary art teacher.

A \$360,000 deficit for the 2013-14 school year necessitated budget cuts to many programs, including the district's art program. O'Hara's job at Palmyra and Eagle elementary schools will be juggled by the middle school art teacher for the coming school year, in addition to a reduction of art sections offered at the middle school and the elimination of kindergarten art classes.

Teachers who are given notice that their contract will not be renewed are afforded the chance to address the board of education. Usually these proceedings are private, but O'Hara and Michelle Dillinger, another teacher addressing the board Tuesday, requested they remain open.

"I wouldn't feel right walking out of this district without saying anything in support of our students and the arts," O'Hara said. "There are so many things that the arts do that I think that many of us overlook or don't acknowledge."

She cited the problem-solving skills that are important in other school subjects, as well as later in life in the workplace, and said she seeks to help students develop those skills in her classroom.

"So if you see a pretty picture hanging up in the classroom, it's not because I'm a good art teacher. It's because I maybe pushed them a little bit further," she said. "And the same if you see something that doesn't look so good. It maybe didn't turn out so well, but that student learned from that picture. They might have experimented and they weren't afraid to try new things. That's what I'm teaching."

The district made other substantial cuts as well, including eliminating \$70,000 from the capital improvements budget for the upkeep of district facilities, reducing the elementary band instructor's position by one-quarter, dropping private lessons for band students at that level, and reducing the high school French teacher's position by 0.5 full-time equivalency, leaving the possibility open to phase out French altogether in the future.

"There are several of us on the board that fought very hard to not have cuts this year," said board member Craig Schnuelle. "And this is the start of probably more to come. And it's said that we really have no choice, that we're going to lose a great teacher. My son won't have the chance of having Ms. O'Hara."

The proposed reductions brought tensions to a head at the podium, as parents and board of education members alike expressed their frustration with the current state of the district.

Craig Webster, a father of two district students, spoke in support of the elementary band program, now reduced for the coming school year.

"Band enriches all of our lives," he said. "It actually has helped (my daughter) academically, because for some kids they might need a little extra motivation and their parents may say, 'Hey, if you want to keep playing the drums, you have to step up your game in math.'"

He also noted that programs such as music are the deciding factor for many when choosing the district to which they send their students.

"For my family, and for my community, we believe that band is important," Webster stated.

His daughter, Amberlee, a sixth-grader at Eagle Elementary School, also took the podium.



TOUGH TIMES — The Palmyra-Eagle Area School District Board of Education met Tuesday night in a five-hour meeting to consider budget reductions for the 2013-14 school year, as well as the non-renewal of two teacher contracts. Shown above, parents at the meeting react after learning that Erin O'Hara, the district's elementary art teacher, will have her job cut for the coming school year. Below, Michelle Dillinger, left, and O'Hara hug after learning of their contracts' nonrenewal for the coming school year.



"Band opens up your mind to music and has really taught me how to appreciate music," she said. "I think every student should be able to participate in this fun activity more than one day a week."

Deb Ackermann, a mother of two children, spoke of how she sees budget cuts in the past few years hurting the district as a whole.

"Our curriculum has decreased so drastically that it has affected our students," she said. "Our school district has lost its way."

She recounted her son's experience in the district, where she said he did not get the support he needed to reach his grade level. Eventually, she moved him to another school district, where, she said, her son is now academically thriving.

"I know of several people who didn't want to move to Eagle because they didn't want to be in our school district," she said. "They went to Mukwonago instead."

Wisconsin's open-enrollment system has hurt Palmyra-Eagle badly since its implementation in 1998. The law allows families to apply for enrollment at any school district regardless of where they live, giving parents additional choices if they feel their resident school district is not adequate for their child.

The original intent of the law was to foster competition among neighboring districts and help improve the system as a whole. However, Palmyra-Eagle District Administrator Glenn Schlender said, rural districts such as Palmyra-Eagle only have seen a decline in enrollment along with a declining budget.

As students leave for the larger, more attractive districts nearby, namely Mukwonago and Kettle Moraine, they take state aid money with them, meaning the district has watched its budget decline year after year. Lower budgets mean less money for programs, which drives more students out to larger schools, perpetuating the cycle.

"When we talk to the parents that apply, we hear lots of different things. Everything from 'I want my child to get a Division One scholarship,' to 'more opportunities,'" he said. "So we do listen to parents. The principals and I take those things very seriously."

District business manager Pat Miller expounded on the financial difficulties the open enrollment system has created for the district.

"Talk to your legislators about plugging the hole in open enrollment. Eleven percent of our general fund in our budget goes to open enrollment. Twenty-nine percent of our state aid is turned over to other districts because of open enrollment," he said. "And I understand that parents are open-enrolling their kids out because they have better opportunities. How do we get better opportunities here when we're cutting a check for \$1.5 million to other districts?"

Schlender said this year, the number of students who have applied to leave the district is down from previous years, but the actual number who leave for bigger schools won't be known until school begins in the fall.

Board member Craig Schnuelle, however, said not all of the district's budget problems stemmed from open enrollment. Unlike many districts in the area, the communities of the Palmyra-Eagle School District in recent years have voted down operating budget referendums that would allow administrators more leeway to maintain programming.

"We don't have the choice of doing everything we want. I want a high school, a middle school, and two elementary schools all in separate buildings all with librarians and phy-ed teachers," said Schnuelle. "That's what I want in the district, and I'm willing to pay for it. But we don't have a community that's willing to pay for it, so we have limitations that we have to deal with."

Also at the meeting, a hearing was held to consider the non-renewal of Michelle Dillinger's contract, a third-grade teacher at Eagle Elementary School. Several parents spoke during the public comment section in support of Dillinger, and a nearly three-hour argument session allowed both the administration and Dillinger to present contrasting evidence of the teacher's performance.

Although Dillinger contended the administration's case for her non-renewal was based on "generalizations, omissions and falsified information," the board ultimately sided with Schlender and Eagle Elementary School principal Michelle Weisrock and did not renew Dillinger's contract for the 2013-14 school year.

Dillinger's position will not be replaced, adding a further budget reduction of one instructional position.

The board has set a workshop meeting for Wednesday, May 8, at which it will discuss the district's direction and problems, as well as ways they can be addressed.

That meeting will be held at 6 p.m. in the Irvin L. Young Community Room at Palmyra-Eagle Middle and High School.

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