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VOLUSIA COUNTY EDUCATION

Volusia teachers, district still at odds on contract

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It's not uncommon these days for a company to push more of its health insurance tab to employees.

"Absolutely, that's a trend," said Marshall Kapp, director of the Florida State University Center for Innovative Collaboration in Medicine & Law, noting that it's true for both public and private sector workers. "Insurance costs are going up, so companies are trying to shift more costs to their employees."

That's what the Volusia County School district is trying to do — a move that could save millions a year and clear up funds to allow raises for teachers. But the teachers union, currently lobbying for a 4 percent pay raise, has already turned down one proposal from the district.

It's likely teachers will reject another insurance-altering proposal that is now on the table, which negotiations are unlikely to end anytime soon. The union plans to rally outside the Dec. 8 board meeting.

"We do not see a settlement in the near future," union president Andrew Spar said, adding that the deal is "requiring employees to pay for their own raise."

Volusia County teachers, with an average salary of \$44,250, make less than the counterparts in Flagler County, where the average is \$52,646.

A recent study by Aon, a global provider of risk management, insurance and reinsurance brokerage, found that the average amount that employees need to contribute toward their health care has increased more than 134 percent over the past decade.

Since 2011, the Volusia school district has held the line. Employees choosing single person coverage have paid only \$20 a month for premium insurance plans that cost the district the most money. It's no surprise that 54 percent of teachers choose a triple-option plan (the most expensive to the district) while less than 1 percent choose the least expensive plan.

Consequently, the district pays the highest subsidies of any neighboring district, school officials say.

"There's no incentive right now not to go for the higher-cost plan," said district attorney Michael Dyer. "We are offering some very, very expensive plans that you just don't see from competing districts."

By comparison, Flagler employees pay as much as \$230 per month for single-person health insurance. The cheapest plan is \$54 a month, according to the Flagler district. Insurance rates rose in Flagler two years ago.

A change in the way Volusia pays for health insurance would cause employees to sacrifice their high-price plans, district officials say, but leave the county with money for a 3.12 percent raise.

The latest proposal would require teachers who are currently paying \$20 a paycheck for premium health insurance to pay as much as \$140 more a month — or choose a basic, point-of-service plan, for which the district would pick up the entire cost. Employees in Flagler pay \$55 per month for a similar plan, while teachers in Brevard County pay \$107 per month, according to figures provided by the district.

"Could an employee elect to buy a more expensive platinum plan? Yes. Would they be required to buy up to a more expensive plan? No," said Dyer. "That would be an individual employee's decision."

Spar said the point-of-service plan is the worst plan the district has and pointed out that only 41 teachers out of more than 4,000 currently use it. However, that could be because the district offers all premium plans for \$20 a month.

While district officials are optimistic the two sides can settle, the latest proposal to raise insurance costs adds more frustration and aggravation to teachers who have never been more unhappy, said Spar. In a survey conducted by the teachers union, only 21 teachers out of more than 3,000 agreed that they felt valued by the district and School Board.

"That is a pay cut," Spar said of the proposal. "It really makes us wonder why the School Board is trying to cut teacher pay after promising last school year to make increasing teacher pay a priority. It seems to me that our district wants to say, 'Come teach in Volusia: We will pay you worse than our surrounding counties; we will provide you with one of the worst benefits package of the surrounding counties and a place where most teachers already feel under-appreciated.'"

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