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## Officials urge teachers, board to end strike

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NEOGA -- Students and parents aren't the only ones hoping Saturday's negotiations between the Neoga school board and teachers' union yield an end to the faculty strike that has lasted more than two weeks.

State lawmakers and a regional school official on Thursday weighed in on the matter, submitting a statement pleading for the two sides to resolve differences at the bargaining table and return more than 650 students to the classroom.

John McNary, superintendent of the Regional Office of Education in Charleston, along with state Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, and state Rep. Roger Eddy, R-Hutsonville, issued a "guest editorial" in hopes of communicating their thoughts, not only to the school board and teachers, but also to their other constituents -- young and old alike.

"We are taking this opportunity to jointly express our deep concern by the lack of progress regarding the Neoga teacher's strike," they said in the statement.

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"There is an opportunity here for both sides to truly educate our young people as to how these problems should be resolved. Let's not forget, our children are watching and they deserve our best effort."

Collective bargaining teams from the school board and Neoga Teachers' Association will meet Saturday for the first time in three weeks. At the most recent session Oct. 14 with a federal mediator, the board offered a contract with salary and benefit increases, but with no change to the existing pay schedule.

Two days later, the teachers voted to reject that offer and make preparations for the strike that began Oct. 19. In statements to the media and at a recent public forum, NTA officials indicated obtaining an equitable salary schedule is as meaningful or more to them as pay raises.

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The local lawmakers and regional superintendent said they have "no legal standing to become involved" and they are not willing to choose sides. They said the most important thing to them is ending the strike.

"We're all very and increasingly concerned with the amount of time the kids are staying out of school," said Righter in an interview. "Obviously, there are a lot of people who are characterizing it as a stalemate, and there hasn't been a a sit -down to discuss those issues.

"But you can't negotiate or settle anything unless you're talking."

Righter said his and Eddy's offices have received "a great many calls" from Neoga area residents.

"Most of the calls we have fielded have been concerns for how long the kids have been out of school, and that the sides have not negotiated," Righter said.

Saturday's session was called by the federal mediator, and both sides agreed earlier this week to attend.

Eddy fears a growing number of school districts -- particularly in rural areas -- will contend with similar conflicts.

"It is a difficult time, especially in school districts that are facing property tax issues," Eddy said in an interview. "It's going to become more and more difficult, I believe."

Neoga school administrators reported their district has to return more than \$2 million in property taxes that were overcharged to an area power plant while also facing future reductions of tax revenue for the same reasons.

"These are difficult times for boards and teachers," Eddy said.

He added that as school boards must worry about their districts' "financial solvency," teachers have mounting fears about their "future benefits" -- especially in light of recent changes and challenges to the Illinois Teacher Retirement System.

"These are the kinds of things we may see more of in the coming years," Eddy said.

McNary was not available for comment Thursday evening, however, his name was listed first on the joint statement.

"As this strike continues, the negative effects on students will only worsen. It is our sincere hope that both sides will redouble their efforts to find common ground and settle any issues that remain on the table," they said.

Contact Nathaniel West at [nwest@jg-tc.com](mailto:nwest@jg-tc.com) or 238-6860.

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