

mea Bargaining Update

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Talks Begin as Budget Cuts Loom

Opening Session. Representatives of MEA and the District Administration met yesterday, February 9, for the opening Meet-and-Confer session this year. The committees will meet weekly in an effort to reach an agreement on salaries, benefits, and employment conditions for the 2009-10 school year. MEA is recognized by the Governing Board to represent all non-administrative certificated employees in this annual process.



Team Representatives. The MEA Bargaining Team includes: **Kirk Hinsey**, Chairperson, MEA President and teacher at Powell J.H.; **Valerie Angus**, EVA; **Sue Azizi**, Emerson; **Joelyn Hilton**, Educational Technology; **Eric Stuebner**, Pomeroy; and **Will Moore**, AEA Consultant.

The District is represented by **Dr. Janice Ramirez**, Spokesperson, and Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; **Bruce Cox**, Principal at Smith J.H.; **Steve Green**, Director of Curriculum and Instruction; **Shelly Heath**, Principal at Ishikawa; **Kevin Mendivil**, HR Director of Certified; **William Santiago**, Director of Special Education; and **Holly Williams**, Principal at Skyline H.S.



On the Table. Business was handled quickly at this first session. Kirk Hinsey presented a brief opening statement – which is re-printed on the back. The committees agreed to a set of Ground Rules. Lists of topics for this year's talks were exchanged. The District's list includes only the salary schedules (including Extra Factor), Health and Welfare (insurance), and the Re-opener article itself.

In addition to those topics, MEA also opened Class Size, Medical Leave Assistance, Paydays, Professional Days, Teacher Preparation Days, and a new section on Classroom Assignments. MEA also stated its understanding that all of the previous Agreement document would be part of a new 2009-10 Agreement unless changed or deleted through the 2009 Meet-and-Confer process.



Future Meetings. Meet-and-Confer sessions shall continue each Monday afternoon, probably until the end of March: depending, of course, on what the Arizona Legislature does with school funding. The next session is Monday, February 23, at 4:00 p.m., at the Board Room at 549 N. Stapley Drive. The meetings are open to the public and all district educators are urged to attend.



Legislature and Budget Cuts. Faced with a huge budget deficit, the Legislature has already slashed some \$8 million out of Mesa's budget for the year we're in now. Massive cuts are on the table for 2009-10. On top of that, Mesa is facing another significant enrollment decline. Most of the District's operating budget pays for people – your salaries and benefits. What happens at our local Meet-and-Confer is important, but much of the action will be at the State Capitol.

On the back – Kirk's Opening Statement

Opening Statement: Kirk Hinsey, MEA

As we approach this year's Meet and Confer process, we must remember the lessons from the past and be willing to move forward in an open and transparent manner. We are approaching uncharted waters. We have to deal with issues and make decisions that no one has had to make in Mesa before.

This year has been an extremely difficult year and the employees and educators at the site level are feeling overworked, overstressed, and overwhelmed with the pressure from above to continue to do more with less and less. We understand the difficult situation of the state budget and the will of the legislature to cut school budgets to balance next year's shortfall, but there has to be a time where enough is enough and that as the budget is trimmed, it is done with the transparency to be open and honest. The public needs to know how these cuts will affect the services to the students of Mesa.

Last year, during the end of the process, we had some concerns over the final settlement. Both sides need to be willing to bring ideas to the table for open discussion before decisions are made. We do not want to have to bring people together in 110 degree heat to a July Board meeting.

There are many naysayers throughout the district who say the Meet and Confer process is a waste of time. They believe the district will continue to make the decisions and the employees' opinions, experience and professionalism will not matter. The cynic in me sometimes agrees, especially when decisions are made without open communication. Fortunately, the optimist in me continues to win over and I look for the opportunities to strengthen the process as well as the relationship between the district and its employees, represented by the various employee groups.

I am proud of the work MEA has done over the decades to develop the Agreement and provide for better working conditions for its educators and better learning conditions for its students. It has not always been perfect, and the naysayers continue to complain about it, but it has provided a living document to be proud of. I would like to see it continue to be valued by the district and for the relationship to grow.

This year, more than any other, will be a challenge. The district can hopefully work through these challenges and obstacles in openness and transparency. The morale of its employees and educators will only help to foster the quality education Mesa Public Schools is known for. The employees from the bottom up are what make this district great. As I sit through Board meetings, I see the pride the superintendents and the Board feel as the district wins a state championship, is recognized for an outstanding academic achievement, or honors its employees of the month. The common thread throughout all of these accolades is the people that make it happen. That's why I continue to believe that the process works and that the employees matter and that the working conditions for these educators are valued and important.

As we move through the process, let's hope that we keep this in mind. Difficult decisions will need to be made. But as those decisions are made, both sides should be willing to work with the other with mutual respect and openness. As a good English teacher, I will return to my metaphor. These uncharted waters may be rocky and rough, we may even feel a little seasickness from time to time, but we can weather it by working together.

Save the date -

Wednesday, March 4, 4:00 p.m.

AEA Rally at the Capitol

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SCHOOLS