

Ridgeline, union at odds

The charter school's efforts to reach a labor agreement is a "painfully slow" process

BY ANNE WILLIAMS

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Employees at Eugene's Ridgeline Montessori Public Charter School voted last fall to affiliate with the American Federation of Teachers, making Ridgeline what is believed to be the only charter school in Oregon with an independently organized union.

But they're finding efforts to hash out a first labor agreement with Ridgeline administrators more difficult than they'd hoped.

"The bargaining process has been painfully slow," said Jennifer Wyld, who teaches seventh and eighth grades at Ridgeline and has served on the bargaining team since the two groups began meeting in January.

Wyld, who just finished her sixth year at Ridgeline, said administrators have balked at many of the union's proposals regarding due process, academic freedom and other issues. Initially, administrators also proposed pay cuts of at least 10 percent to help the school weather the state's ongoing fiscal crisis — although they have since tentatively agreed to freeze only cost-of-living increases, Wyld said.

Board member Mary Bauer, a former teacher who serves on the administration team, said the union's portrayal of negotiations isn't entirely accurate — though she declined to comment on specifics, citing legal advice.

"I don't see that we're stuck or stalled," said Bauer, one of the founders of the nine-year-old school, which serves students in grades K-8. "I just see that it's a very complicated process."

A bargaining session last Wednesday fell just hours before a suspicious, predawn fire destroyed the lower classroom wing at Ridgeline, housed in the old Willard Elementary building at 2855 Lincoln St. Bauer said administrators are focused on finding a new location to serve Ridgeline's 240 students, but that bargaining will resume, as scheduled, in mid-July.

"We have a timeline that's legally mandated," she said.

AFT represents employees at about 70 charter schools across the country, said Eben Pullman, an AFT field representative assisting Ridgeline workers. Charter supporters have tended to eschew unions, believing they could impede independence and innovation at the publicly funded yet largely autonomous schools.

However, a sizable number of Oregon charter schools — including all four based in Salem — are part of their sponsoring districts' collective bargaining, with the districts actually employing the charter school staff. (This would be the arrangement at Springfield's Academy of Arts and Academics, a small district high school that's seeking to convert to a charter school.)

AFT has about 10,000 members across Oregon, representing mainly higher education employees but also classified workers in several school districts, Pullman said. The vast majority of Oregon public school teachers belong to the Oregon Education Association, an offshoot of the National Education Association.

Though teacher unions — particularly the NEA — traditionally have been at odds with the charter movement, Pullman said AFT would be happy to collaborate with other Oregon charter schools.

"If employees reach out to us, we'd love to help them," he said. "We believe that's the right of every worker."

The effort to form a union at Ridgeline Montessori has been fraught with tension from the beginning. Teachers first looked into the possibility last summer, following the forced resignation of one teacher and the school's

decision to reprimand another, Janell Heidenreich, and place her on a so-called “plan of assistance.”

“A number of us were concerned about the process,” Wyld said. “It isn’t as clear as it could be at our school — the documentation, what kind of recourse there is, just what is the process for teachers.”

Academic freedom had also become a concern, she said, with some teachers feeling constrained in their ability to stay true to the Montessori model, which emphasizes child-directed learning.

“Most of us are happy most of the time and everything’s fine — we love what we do,” Wyld added. “But over the years just enough little things have kept adding up.”

Employees first met in July to talk about whether they were interested in forming a union. In September, close to 70 percent of employees signed authorization cards, Pullman said. But at least 30 percent of the 24 union-represented employees petitioned for a second, secret-ballot vote, which was held by the state Employment Relations Board. In that, 13 voted in favor and eight against, with three not voting.

Also, in September, Ridgeline’s not-yet-formalized union — called Eugene Charter School Professionals, a chapter of the AFT — filed an unfair labor practice claim with the state over Heidenreich’s reprimand and plan of assistance.

According to case findings, the discipline stemmed from a remark Heidenreich made in a May phone call to then-Principal Cindy Bass regarding her concerns about her own evaluation and the handling of the resignation of her colleague, who is not named in the document.

Heidenreich, who had recently contacted both the AFT and NEA to inquire about union representation, told Bass she was considering calling a strike, the ruling said. That prompted administrators to bring in substitutes and board members the following Monday to teach classes if necessary.

There was no strike, but administrators decided the threat warranted disciplinary action. In March, an administrative law judge dismissed the union’s claim.

Wyld said the administration tried to throw cold water on the union effort. Bauer, who taught in the Eugene School District for 25 years, conceded the board was upfront from the start that it “didn’t think (a union) would serve us well,” but said there was no overt attempt to block it.

Bauer said she modeled the Ridgeline teacher contract after the Eugene district’s. “It was my intention that the template be exactly like 4J in terms of evaluation, in terms of salaries, wages, benefits,” she said.

One difference: Ridgeline teachers earn a bit less than their counterparts in district schools, though they also have full-time instructional assistants in their classrooms.

But Wyld said without union rights — including binding arbitration, which the board has not agreed to — protections in the current contract lack teeth.

Having bumped up against the 150-day bargaining time limit, when the two sides next meet it will be with a mediator.

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— MARY BAUER, RIDGELINE MONTESSORI SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR