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Towns > Hebron

Hebron school board restores some positions

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HEBRON — The school board reinstated 2½ paraprofessionals and a part-time secretary Tuesday.

Money to fund the positions, approximately \$54,000, came from a variety of line-item transfers, including pre-buying computer supplies for next year totaling around \$20,000 and through a recently announced teacher's retirement that will produce around \$15,000 in savings when a new contract is negotiated.

"I am just thrilled we were able to make some movement in the right direction," Superintendent Eleanor Cruz said.

The push to avert the layoffs came from the Connecticut State Employees Association and Service Employees International Union, which represents 153 Hebron staff, 53 of them noncertified school employees.

"We are very fortunate to have all these positions restored," said Gail Gonydke, a Hebron Elementary School secretary and president of the chapter in Local 2001 of the CSEA/SEIU.

Gonydke's position, one of 3½ secretaries at Hebron Elementary, was not on the list of the superintendent's cuts.

The layoffs of noncertified staff, saving nearly \$75,000, was part of \$467,557 in reductions the school board adopted on June 15 after the Board of Finance forced a no-increase budget after two failed budgets.

"The bottom line is that the services your noncertified support staff provide make it possible for teachers to teach, students to learn, and parents to have peace of mind," Gonydke said in her comments to the school board.

Gonydke said staff members are often called the "engine that keeps Hebron's schools running," working with special needs children, preparing meals, keeping the buildings and grounds safe, and providing a direct link between parents and children at the main offices.

A custodian position, at a cost of \$27,928, was the one noncertified position that was not reinstated, though union members are hopeful that additional savings can be found and the position restored.

Union representative George Gould said he would be working with Cruz to try to find additional savings through recently passed legislation that provides for the pooling of prescription drug costs by allowing municipalities and school districts to participate in the state's prescription drug plan.

Cruz was uncertain as to the savings that could be found through this route.

"It is a good day when student services are provided and good strong, middle-class jobs are retained in a community that has been through a rough couple of years," CSEA/SEIU

spokesman Matthew O'Connor said.

Reduced hours for another secretary, at a savings of \$1,379, however, stayed in effect.

At the beginning of the budget season, a total of 7.7 positions were slated for elimination, including two teaching positions, one custodian, 3½ paraprofessionals, and one secretary with reduced hours. One of the paraprofessional jobs will be vacant due to a resignation, according to Cruz.

Cruz said she is also looking at additional cost-saving measures in transportation and tuition costs through a new elementary behavioral program to bring back special needs students who are currently outside the district. The move would allow for the hiring of two paraprofessionals, a cost of \$56,430, with additional costs being picked up by a state excess-cost grant, according to Cruz.

"I'm pretty confident we'll be able to make all these changes and manage the challenges of a zero percent increase budget next year," Cruz said, adding that she is feeling "much more encouraged" now that "direct services to students," one of her concerns, have been reestablished.

"We were actually able to accomplish some good last night," board member Kathy Shea said today. "It's been a very hard, stressful budget season. I'm looking forward to moving on."

Shea said at next week's July 8 meeting, a full overview of the \$11.71 million budget's final cuts will be presented and a vote taken.

The school board also welcomed Amy Campbell, a second-grade teacher in Preston, as a new assistant principal.

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