

School cafeteria plan still a worry Windham could outsource workers

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WINDHAM — The board of education is expected to informally decide if it will hire a private company to service Windham school cafeterias, a controversial move that has upset current cafeteria workers. The change, if approved, would replace cafeteria workers employed by the school system with a food services company, which could save the town money. The board meets at 7 p.m. at the old Kramer Middle School.

In March, Windham School Superintendent Doreen Fuller sent out requests for proposals to determine if hiring a food service company would save the town money.

Kenneth Folan, chairman of the board of education, would not say how much the town could potentially save, but said one of the two companies they narrowed it down to would save more.

Folan said the board wouldn't formally vote on the issue tonight, but would try to "come to a consensus" in executive session.

"It could die in committee," Folan said, adding he hopes to have some sort of answer tonight. If they decide to move forward, the board will choose a company and then schedule a public forum for a later date.

After hearing from both the public and the food service company, the board could then conduct a formal vote.

If approved, the change would be implemented at the beginning of this coming school year, Folan said.

"You have to take out emotion and you have to look at the bottom line," Folan said, adding the economy is bad and the board has to do what's best fiscally for the town.

Folan said the town would save money on food and employee benefits by using a private company.

The companies they are looking at are nationwide and have food buying power the schools don't have, he said. "This happens to be the beginning of an examination of our entire spending process," Folan said. "Things aren't getting better."

Windham's recently approved education budget for 2009-10 is \$ 41.25 million, the same budget as the current fiscal year.

School officials said constantly flat spending could harm programs and staff numbers, with the newest budget already resulting in some staff reductions.

According to Folan, cafeteria employees would have the option of working for the food service company and staying in the cafeteria they currently work in.

The pay rate would remain the same, but the benefits might cost workers more, he said.

Folan also said there might be more career options for those who choose to work for the food service company.

Still, union officials said such an employment situation isn't guaranteed.

Matt O'Connor — communications director for the Connecticut State Employees Association, Service Employees International Union Local 2001 (CSEA/SEIU), the union that represents cafeteria workers — said contracting companies usually offer to hire back workers, but it doesn't always happen.

"Often what happens is the contractor will say, 'sure, we'll keep the workforce' and then in practice, they offer positions to a percentage of the previous work force," O'Connor said.

O'Connor said there are usually changes in wages, health care, pension plans or other areas that create a significant drop in economic security for the workers.

"We've seen a corresponding drop in the quality of work life for cafeteria professionals when they have been replaced by outside contractors," O'Connor said.

He also said in other cases around the state where private companies were hired, the quality in food, nutrition and efficiency decreases.

The cafeteria workers, led by their union, have created a petition with more than 1,000 signatures opposing the plan.

In addition, several local politicians have signed pledge forms stating their position against hiring an outside company.

O'Connor will present the petition and the pledges to the board of education at the meeting tonight.