

## Teaching jobs in limbo for now

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By DANALINE McPHAIL BRYANT Messenger staff writer |

STEWART — Consideration of an announced reduction in force at Federal Hocking Local Schools was delayed Monday because state officials said they are trying to find money to make up for their administrative mistake.

The agenda for Monday's special meeting of the Federal Hocking School Board — held in The Plains at the Ohio Education Association's office — included a motion calling for the elimination of seven positions at Amesville and Coolville Elementary Schools.

As previously reported by The Messenger, Federal Hocking officials were notified Sept. 21, with no warning, that Reading First grant funding previously allocated for the school year would be immediately reduced because of a state-level error.

In an e-mail, the Ohio Department of Education official in charge of the program said he had learned that Reading First funds had been "over-allocated" by more than \$7 million statewide. When dividing up federal funds to individual districts, state officials used a dollar amount that included funds that had been spent the previous year. They planned distributions based on more than \$11 million, when they actually had only \$4,667,979.

Eighteen Ohio school districts set to receive those funds planned their yearly budget on the amount certified by the state. After discovering the error, state officials refigured the funds and notified each district of the impending cuts. At Federal Hocking, the allocation was changed from \$430,000 to \$160,000, a loss of \$270,000. Reductions statewide will be implemented Friday.

Two district officials said in Friday interviews that the only likely option likely would be to implement an immediate reduction in force.

A special meeting was called for Monday so the board could consider a response to the loss of funding.

A large crowd of concerned Federal Hocking employees attended the meeting. Positions listed in the agenda for possible elimination included two Reading First intervention specialists at Coolville; one Reading First literacy specialist; two full-time aides at Amesville; and two part-time aides at Coolville.

Employees listed as losing their jobs if the reduction in force action was taken were teachers Brenda Abele, Kelly Millsbaugh and Jadey Gilmore, and aides Denise Stewart and Sunshine Russell.

In all cases of a reduction in force, school employees who hold positions to be eliminated are not necessarily the ones who lose their jobs because union contracts require that employees with the least seniority are the first to lose their jobs.

As the meeting was called to order Monday, President Tom McGuire said no action would be taken or public comments heard until Supt. Jim Patsey gave an update on the situation that possibly could change the board's action.

Patsey said he and Treasurer Bruce Steenrod on Monday had a conference call with Stan Hefner, an administrator who works directly with State Supt. of Instruction Deborah Delisle. He asked them to ask the board not to take any action on Monday so state officials would have time to find additional money.

"He said they are trying to come up with additional money, not for the rest of the year, but he almost guaranteed me there would be enough beyond the \$160,000 to pay for one more month," Patsey said.

That additional month would give state officials time to try to find additional federal funds that, possibly, could fund the threatened jobs for the rest of the year.

"Stan and the director of the program apologized again for the mistake, which is nice to hear, but it doesn't help us to deal with the

situation. ... This was a very large mistake and some of the local politicians at the state level are trying to do everything they can (to put pressure on state education officials to fix the problem),” Patsey said. “However this happened — they spent the money last year, and it’s pretty hard for me to understand how that big of a mistake could be made. I don’t want anyone to lose their job, and this gives them a month to try to find money to fund the program. Since this is a federal program, they will try to find federal money to alleviate the situation. I hope enough money will be found to keep the staff for the end of the year.”

McGuire urged people to contact elected and appointed officials in Columbus and let them know their feelings, adding that he was “very angry” over the mistake and had contacted state officials to let them know that.

“A freshman in Federal Hocking High School has better math skills than whoever screws up this bad,” McGuire said. “Perhaps a way to prevent this type of disastrous error in the future is to have all administrative officials qualify for their jobs by passing the 12th-grade math test on the Ohio Graduation Test.”

Public comments usually aren’t allowed in special meetings, but McGuire said he wanted to allow it in this case.

Several people asked the board to fund the jobs through federal jobs stimulus money recently received. District officials have said they have been advised to save these funds for the next school year. Federal Hocking has been told to expect deep cuts next year — perhaps as much as \$700,000.

“If I didn’t have much money to buy food right now, I would spend my money on immediate needs and not save it for the future,” said one parent. “We need that money used for immediate needs. I hope you will give some consideration to use that money now. ... We need these jobs saved right now, not next year.”

McGuire said there would be “no positive solutions” and “no easy choice” in the difficult decision the board faced. He said the board needs to decide the best solution with the least negative impact, but he pledged to consider all options.

“Having their schedules redone will affect every single child’s experience at both schools,” said a teacher. “I caution you to consider the value in how you spend the money.”

“As the former executive director of Reading First Ohio, I know how well Federal Hocking and other area districts have done with the program,” said Professor James A. Salzman, executive director of the Ohio University Stevens Literacy Center. “It shows what teachers can do with professional development. I am here to offer support and help.”

“I’ve heard good arguments for keeping the teachers now, if at all possible,” said parent Tracey Conrad. “There is a fragile sense of stability and of morale in the district. Staff and parents try to keep it from the kids, but they, too, feel it.”