58 News Milwaukee

Cost-of-living wage hikes at center of MPS-union dispute

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MILWAUKEE (CBS 58) -- A bargaining session between Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and the teachers' union had some bite Monday. At the center of the contentious talks is when workers would get a wage adjustment aimed at accounting for cost-of-living increases.

On Tuesday, the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) hosted a town hall meeting in Washington Park. The union welcomed three MPS board directors in person, James Ferguson, Marva Herdon and Kate Vannoy. Director Mimi Reza was set to join virtually.

The board will ultimately decide how to amend and eventually approve a 2026-27 school year budget submitted by Superintendent Brenda Cassellius.

This has been a painful budget process, as MPS faces a $46 million budget gap.

Cassellius has sought to bridge the gap by eliminating more than 260 non-teacher positions, including intervention specialists and assistant principals.

The union has bristled at the proposed job cuts, and MTEA leaders are now publicly pushing back against Cassellius' proposal to delay the inflation wage adjustments.

The cost-of-living increases are on top of raises the union is still negotiating with MPS.

Both sides agree workers should get a 2.63% wage adjustment. However, Cassellius wants to delay when those adjustments take effect while the union insists they come in July, when they normally do.

Cassellius has previously said the district would save between $15 million and $17 million if the wage adjustments were delayed until January 2027. However, a district spokesman told CBS 58 Wednesday that number applies to both union and non-union employees.

The district now estimates total savings from delaying the wage adjustments range from $10.3 million to $16.7 million. Specifically for MTEA members, the savings would range from $3.3 million to $7.8 million.

According to bargaining documents obtained by CBS 58, giving the full 2.63% wage adjustment on July 1 would cost $31.9 million. Delaying the adjustments until January would lower the cost to about $24.1 million.

A partial adjustment where union members got a 1.5% bump in July and the remaining 1.13% adjustment in January would cost $28.6 million.

Union leaders maintain the district can find those dollars elsewhere, suggesting MPS could instead cut some of its contracts with outside vendors.

"The district does have money," Walker-Henry said. "They have it in their contracts that they actually need to go through and ensure every contract they have is actually servicing students."

The union also argued MPS had messed up some of its math and actually could afford to provide the wage adjustment in July at a cost the district previously said it couldn't afford.

However, during Monday's bargaining session, the district countered that the MTEA was trying to make an apples-and-oranges comparison using two totally different sets of numbers.

The district hired the Council of Great City Schools as a consultant, and through that group, Judith Marte spoke during the bargaining session. Marte had previously overseen school finances in Broward County and Miami-Dade County in Florida.

"You would be accurate in saying you found us money if there was money left in the program at the end of the year, but there's not," Marte said of benefit costs. "We're always short."

Colleston Morgan, executive director of the City Forward Collective in Milwaukee, said he believes MPS has a better grasp of its finances following a series of outside audits by Governor Tony Evers and the state Legislature following the 2024 fiscal disaster that prompted state intervention.

Morgan said his organization, which advocates for both public and private schools, believes MPS should be aggressive in closing the budget gap, and that includes delaying wage adjustments.

"We've gotta get this budget in order," he said. "And at this point in time, that's gonna mean everyone's gotta take a little bit of pain to get us to the next step."