

If the teachers union and *News* columnist Jeff Oldfather had their way, they would have you believe that Martin County teachers are being bullied into a contract by the school district and the school board. They also would have you believe the school board is the sole reason for teachers possibly not being eligible for retroactive pay. Their tactics, words and actions tell a different story: They are the ones who are the bullies.

The union wants the public to think the board and the district do not respect Martin County's teachers. Nothing could be further from the truth. The same thing happened four years ago – election-year rhetoric and other bully tactics get more attention and sympathy than the true story.

The facts in this case are very clear: The school board offered a very generous package to the county's 1,237 teachers, including:

- A five percent salary increase
- A two percent increase in fully paid medical insurance
- Retirement contribution equal to 8 percent of their salary
- Beginning teacher salary of \$37,000.

This offer was made at the beginning of negotiations, and represented what the district could afford. It also reflects an increase of almost \$4.2 million -- including benefits -- over last year. The offer never changed throughout the negotiations and was supported by all five school board members, up to and including the last executive session where each member verbally agreed.

It is completely absurd to suggest a seven percent raise shows a lack of respect. The district's budget was cut by the state by more than \$3 million since the beginning of the year, but we are providing raises and benefit increases for our teachers. Meanwhile, many families in our community face uncertain futures because parents have lost their jobs, or the mortgage company is threatening to take their home. We have done what we can to make sure that our teachers do not become a statistic in these uncertain economic times.

Another untruth circulating is that the district and the school board will deny teachers retroactive pay. Whether or not teachers receive their retroactive pay is not a decision to be made by the board, but is in accordance with Florida Statute FS447.403(4)(E). The statute prohibits the retroactive pay if the contract is not ratified.

Martin County residents have a right to know both sides of an issue so they can make an informed decision. If voters want to turn over control of school board and the district to the teachers union, that is their right; however, they should have all of the facts available. Only having one side of the story discussed is a disservice to everyone involved – teachers, the school board and taxpayers.

Simply regurgitating information that was spoon fed by the union is irresponsible journalism.

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