

Frequently Asked Questions about Great Valley Teacher Contract Negotiations August, 2018

Q: When did teacher contract negotiations begin, and what has happened throughout the process to this point?

A: Negotiations began in January. The Board published its [goals for negotiations](#) on the District's website. Both sides have continued to meet and negotiate throughout the spring and summer. Recognizing there is an impasse at the bargaining table, both sides have agreed to enter a process called "fact finding."

Q: What is fact finding?

A: Fact finding is a process by which the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board appoints a neutral, third party arbitrator to analyze the facts of the bargaining differences. He/she will issue a series of recommendations within 40 days. Both the school district and the Association must vote to accept or reject the entire report within 10 days of receiving it. If either side rejects it, it can be made public and the parties must vote again. The recommendations of the fact finder are not binding, and both sides could continue to negotiate, or take additional steps. Under the law, no strike may occur during the fact finding resolution process.

Q: Who is at the negotiations table, and why?

A: The school district is following a corporate model of negotiations in which professional negotiators are at the table along with school administrators. While the Board is not actively sitting at the table, they are consistently updated after each bargaining session and are involved in discussions and provide input and direction. The Board established goals and parameters before negotiations began, providing their negotiator with close guidance.

Q: What are the goals of the District for the teacher contract negotiations?

A:

- Negotiate a contract that allows the district to continue to allocate funds for the preservation and protection of the high quality programs that are hallmarks of the Great Valley School District and necessary for the district's continued success. This includes continued emphasis on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) curriculum, technology advancements, support for the arts, and the possible implementation of a full day kindergarten program.
- Implement a health care plan that provides fair coverage for employees but also helps to lower its geometric increases in health care premiums to the school district. Great Valley has seen a 46% increase in health care costs over the last three years.
- Remain competitive by offering a compensation package that continues to attract and retain high quality teachers.

- Provide parameters that maximize employee time and professional development while offering a supportive and collaborative working environment.

Q: What are the major issues in these negotiations?

A: While both sides have agreed not to discuss the details of negotiations, the two largest issues are salaries and benefits. The Board must work within revenue limits established by Act 1 (the state law governing how much school districts can raise taxes.) We are working toward an agreement that allows us to stay within those limits and also fund other priorities. The fact finder will summarize all of the open issues if/when the report is publicly released.

Q: What are the other major priorities the district wants to fund?

A: In addition to providing competitive and excellent salaries for staff, the district is striving to remain competitive by offering a comprehensive K – 12 STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math) curriculum, increasing summer programming, improving and expanding the district's aging buildings, providing essential security and safety improvements, protecting class sizes, potentially offering a full day kindergarten program, and continuing to maintain and upgrade the district's technology.

Q: How do Great Valley teachers' salary and benefits compare to those in other Chester County school districts?

A: At the top of the teaching scale, with 16 years' experience, Great Valley teachers are the highest paid in the county with a salary of \$113,724. Their extremely generous healthcare package is platinum level, the highest available. The salary and benefits package is not only at the pinnacle for Chester County teachers, but the health benefits program far exceeds what is generally available for executives in the private sector. The salaries are comparable to middle management positions in large private sector entities.

Q: Do teacher salaries correlate with student achievement? Aren't the highest achieving school districts also the ones with the highest teacher salaries?

A: While many of the highest performing school districts tend to offer higher teacher compensation packages, there is no direct correlation between performance and salaries. In fact, many of the highest achieving districts in the state do not offer the highest compensation.

Q: How do our student to teacher ratios compare to other Chester County school districts?

A: Great Valley has more teachers to students than both Unionville-Chadds Ford and Tredyffrin-Easttown. Great Valley has 12 students to every one teacher compared to TE which has about 14 students for every one teachers union member.

Q: I have heard class sizes in the district are increasing. Is this true?

A: Overall, class sizes have not increased. The exception is some of our high school classes that have gone from extremely small sizes (such as 8 – 12 students) to more typical class sizes of 20 – 30. If classes go over the guideline, additional supports or adjustments are made when appropriate.

Q: What are some of the uncontrollable costs facing the school district?

A: Dramatically increasing healthcare costs (an increase of 46% in the last three years), significant increases in the district's mandated contributions to the state educators' retirement system (PSERS), significant increases in special education costs, and a growing list of unfunded or under-funded mandates such as standardized testing, school health programs and training, and transportation costs.

Q: Why don't you use money in your fund balance to pay for some of the salary increases?

A: Fund balance reserves are used for one-time costs such as a roof replacement, or an addition to a building. Salaries require a consistent source of revenue to fund them each year. Using fund balance to pay for salaries would be like taking money out of your savings account to pay your rent or mortgage. It's not considered financially prudent or sustainable by financial organizations that rate school districts to use fund balance dollars to pay for recurring expenditures such as salaries and benefits.

Q: Can you raise taxes to pay for the increases the teachers want?

A: Act 1 limits the amount that school districts can raise taxes. For 2018-19, Great Valley's limit is currently 2.4%, which generates \$1.9 million. This has to cover increases in benefits, salaries, and other operational increases and priorities. Currently, that's not enough to fund the Education Association's requests.

Q: The district's tax base is increasing, and Great Valley has reduced its debt service by \$4.5 million. Why can't this money be used to fund the increases the teachers want?

A: Over the last two years we've seen our tax base increase, but that is driven by a healthy economy and economies are cyclical. That tax base can quickly decrease in a down cycle. Short term, that increase might enable us to meet some financial demands, but it wouldn't be fiscally responsible to rely on this to fund the kind of long-term financial commitments that contract agreements create.

The Board also strongly believes that even if the community assumes that the district has the financial capacity to fund the teachers' salary and benefits demands, as a matter of equity teachers in the district are already compensated well in excess of other county school districts, and the demands of the union are in excess of what is required to recruit and retain top teacher talent. In addition, financial resources are needed, and will continue to be needed, to fund optimal educational programs for students.

We have paid off a portion of our debt, decreasing our debt payments by \$4.5 million. However, there are numerous future projects that we will need to fund. The District spent nearly \$200 million in the late 1990's through early 2000's to completely renovate and/or build new buildings. In order to maximize their life expectancy, those buildings and renovations need ongoing maintenance. The District has a 10-year maintenance plan to accomplish this, and that plan required a minimum of \$4.4 million each year for the next 10 years (some years significantly higher as the infrastructure ages.)

Q: The teachers' contract has expired, so teachers are "working without a contract." What does that mean?

A: They are working under the conditions of the old contract, otherwise known as "status quo." There are no new raises until a new contract is agreed upon, but the district continues to fund and honor all aspects of the existing contract until a new settlement has been reached. The existing contract is available on the district's website.

Q: Are teachers allowed to communicate directly with their students about the union's position?

A: No.

Q: What is the earliest date that teachers could strike?

A: While we are very hopeful that an agreement will be reached before a strike would occur, the earliest date at which teachers could strike after the fact-finding process has been completed is October 18. Under state law, teachers must provide the superintendent 48 hours' notice before a strike. If notice is given, the district would communicate immediately and thoroughly with parents and other staff about this.

Q: Will the District continue to hold athletic events if the teachers decide to strike?

A: Unfortunately, many of our coaches are also teachers and we would not be able to safely supervise athletic events without our teaching staff.

Q: Will child care be offered in the event of a strike?

A: We are considering a plan to do this. We will communicate hours of operation and locations if we need to move forward.