

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

May 10, 2013

Public School Employees Could See Insurance Rate Increase due to \$60M Shortfall (KARK, Channel 4)

LITTLE ROCK, AR -- The Department of Finance and Administration's Employee Benefits Division insures roughly 150,000 Arkansans. It's facing a shortfall in the Public School Employee sector for 2014 to the tune of \$60 million. Number crunchers say it's likely that rates will have to increase to make up for it.

"You've got to budget for everything, and healthcare is something we do budget for," said elementary teacher Ashley Paladino.

Paladino is like many teachers. She doesn't have just have to worry about keeping student files in order.

"It's scary every dollar counts especially these days," she said.

She's a mom of three, trying to live on a budget, getting paid \$10,000 less a year, and hearing her insurance could cost her more every month in 2014.

"If it goes up and we get less -- it's going to affect us," she said. "We'll have to adjust or I may have to start looking elsewhere for insurance."

The Employee Benefits Board heard the reality of the situation during a subcommittee meeting on Friday. The Public School Employee (PSE) sector has fallen millions behind, because of unexpected, major claims filed in 2012.

"A 60 million dollar short fall for 2014 is a very significant number," said Executive Director Jason Lee. "Those large claims were filed after the rates were set for 2013. They wiped out the reserve fund, so we're having to replenish that, plus continue filling claims."

The reserve fund was \$11 million dollars. The board has to decide whether to increase deductibles, raise premium rates, or eliminate benefits. And none of those options exclude the others.

"We can't continue, financially, at the rates we have now. I would say for Public School Employees are going to have a mixture of a rate increase and possible change in benefits," Lee said.

But that could also affect Arkansas State Employee (ASE) insurance members. The law requires that the rates and benefits be similar. According to Lee, there may be enough benefit changes to offset for ASE the rate changes that PSE members would see.

ASE currently isn't facing the financial hit that the PSE fund is seeing. What happens now is more discussion on how the insurance changes will look.

"They [the EBD Board] will see different plan designs different options," Lee said.

The plans will likely include a variety of changes to rates, benefit coverages, and deductibles. But the goal is to keep it simple enough that members don't have doubts about the benefits they're receiving.

"We need to keep it from getting so complex that we can't sit the employees down and explain what their insurance is," he said. "When they go to the hospital, they need to know their [financial] exposure. When they head to the pharmacy, they need to know how much they owe."

According to Lee, this isn't a money-making venture for the Division. It's self-funded from member rates, school district contributions, and state funding. With the division facing the financial issues, calculating in those expected contributions from schools and the state, the rest has to be made up somehow, and that falls to members.

"We don't want to raise rates where they're unreasonable," Lee said. "And we don't want to reduce benefits to the point that people don't seek the health treatment they need. It's a balance."

The plans are still preliminary, with rate increases likely being less than those presented today as a baseline (in some cases 44 percent).

"I don't think there are many PSE members who could absorb that kind of rate increase," Lee said.

"No, absolutely not. Forty-four percent, I don't know any teacher in this building that could handle that," Paladino said.

According to Lee, that likely won't be the rate increase presented in August. But you have to start somewhere to know where to make adjustments, he added.

According to Paladino, the adjustments are becoming more frequent and more difficult to find room for in the budget. Saying an increase last year makes another one hard to swallow.

"We pay a good deal in for our insurance," she said. "But the rates keep going up. You'd think at some point we would reach a level of stability, but it just keeps going up."

The EBD Board's benefit subcommittee is slated to meet again in June to continue hashing out the details. The final decision on changes won't be made until August.

Gay alumnus sees school snub (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

A 1990 graduate of a northeast Arkansas high school who went on to a career in national television has said that officials at his alma mater have withdrawn an invitation for him to speak at today's commencement ceremonies because he is homosexual.

In a letter to Sloan-Hendrix District Superintendent Mitch Walton, former student Bryant Huddleston, now a Los Angeles television producer, wrote that he was disappointed in the school's decision to "recant your invitation for me to be the keynote speaker ... based solely on the fact that I am gay."

As of Thursday, no one was scheduled to speak at the rural high school in Imboden in northwest Lawrence County, and Walton, in a letter to news media, denied having invited Huddleston or anyone else to speak at graduation.

"Contrary to what has been said, no invitation was extended this year to anyone," Walton wrote. "As superintendent, I have the authority to decide about who the speaker will be or whether we have a speaker at all."

He declined to comment.

"I've already said what I'm going to say and I won't comment further," he said.

Huddleston also denied an interview request, saying his sister would graduate from Sloan-Hendrix High School on Friday and he didn't want to "overshadow" her happiness of the graduation.

In his letter to Walton, Huddleston wrote that he was the school's student body president for two years despite being bullied for his sexuality then.

"Mr. Walton, your decision here is like being bullied again twenty-three years later," Huddleston wrote.

"I'm curious," he wrote. "Did you think my speech would have focused on recruiting youngsters and passing out 'Go Straight to Gay' cards over sharing the tools that I used to achieve success? ... I was hoping to empower your students to continue their education. My speech would have also touched on the importance of women, like my sister, who will go out into the world and know that they can now pull their chairs right up to the table of equality."

Huddleston was a television anchor for KAIT-TV, Channel 8, in Jonesboro before moving to California where he's produced television shows for E! News, Access Hollywood and the Bravo TV network.

School Board President Steve Huddleston, who is Bryant Huddleston's father, did not return several telephone messages. Board member Aaron Murphy also did not return messages.

Someone at board member Preston Clark's home who answered the phone said Clark was busy and hung up. Clark did not return the call.

In his letter to media, Walton said his decision to forgo having a graduation speaker was discussed over the past year. "My decision ... was to discontinue the use of outside speakers and thereby shorten an already lengthy graduation program," he wrote.

Meanwhile, at another district, concerns over school prayer led to cancellation of sixth-grade graduation ceremonies, the superintendent said.

The Riverside School District School Board chose not to hold graduation ceremonies for sixth-graders at West Elementary on May 19 and East Elementary on May 23 after a parent expressed concerns about students praying at the event, said Superintendent Tommy Knight.

Riverside School Board members met Monday evening and voted to cancel the graduations at the district in Lake City and Caraway.

"It's been discussed before if we should hold graduations," Knight said. "Not all sixth grades have graduations. It's a nonissue."

He said the main reason to cancel the events was because of the prayer, though.

"I don't want to comment any further," he said.

Parents have said they may hold ceremonies at an area church for the sixth-grade graduates.

Arrest Made in Hit and Run at Bus Stop that Injured Child (KARK, Channel 4)

JACKSONVILLE, AR- The Pulaski County Sheriff's Department has made an arrest in the hit and run that left a 12-year-old injured at a bus stop this morning.

According to investigators, 24-year-old Julia Locke admits to striking the child as she approached the stopped bus at Old Tom Box Road and Brister Drive.

Locke is said to have then continued to a store.

Lock then took an alternate route home, and did not check on the condition of the child, according to the arrest report.

Locke has been charged with Leaving the Scene of an Accident, and 2nd Degree Battery, both Felonies. Her bond has been set at \$5,000. Locke posted her bond and was release from the jail. She will appear in Pulaski County District County June 18th at 9am.

The condition of the child is not being released at this time.

Vandals Strike at Monticello's Drew Central High School (KARK, Channel 4)

Sometime Thursday night, vandals broke into the Drew Central High School.

They wreaked havoc in the two main hallways strowing food products, paper towels, and large sheets of bulletin board backing.

At least one fire extinguisher was discharged, coating everything nearby with a chemical powder.

Glitter was poured on top of baby oil in another area.

A window was used to gain entrance into the buildings.

Monticello Police are on the scene, as the investigation continues.

Only the high school was affected, and it appears that no technical equipment was damaged

DCHS students were moved to the auditorium, while the clean up is underway,

EDITORIAL: Are you listening, school board? (Lovely County Citizen)

Less than a year ago, we took the Eureka Springs School Board to task for the failure of its three new board members --who ran in the 2011-12 school year with the promise to be "open and inclusive" -- to live up to that campaign promise.

Apparently, not only have things not changed since that editorial, they've gotten worse this year.

Last year, while the board decreed the public should withhold comments and questions on any board actions until after the meeting and then convey them to the superintendent and the board president, at least they allowed a signup sheet for people to make public comments at the start of the meeting.

Now, they won't do either of those things.

Legally, the school board says, they do not have to allow public comments. They are only required, under the Freedom of Information Act, to hold their meetings in public.

Technically, they're right.

But ethically, are they right? Is it wise, considerate, responsible or fair to shut the door on hearing the public -- in public?

Time and again, the Eureka Springs public has shown its dedication and caring about the quality of our students' education -- and also about the fair treatment of staff and teachers.

The public enthusiastically supported the new high school, even though it meant property tax increases in a tanking economy.

The public wholeheartedly supported the school district, writing letters and calling representatives, when the state threatened to take a large chunk of those taxes and redistribute them to "poorer" school districts.

The public has given countless volunteer hours -- even with many volunteers having no kids in school -- to help provide our students with a well-rounded experience, not only academically, but in the arts, in sports and in other extracurricular activities.

And now this board has decided it will not allow public comments at its "public" meeting?

Not only that, the board has decided that if members of the public want to get something on the agenda, they have to submit it eight days in advance for the superintendent to decide if it is "appropriate."

The board says it is following the advice of the Arkansas Schools Boards Association's lawyer not to allow public comments.

Maybe that lawyer -- and the board -- should read the handbook that the School Boards Association gives out to new school board members, updated in 2010: "School Board Basics for New Board Members."

Yes, it says members of the public "don't have a right to address the board or otherwise participate in the meeting unless the board has made such a request."

But it also says, under "Managing Public Comments":

"Boards that opt to include a period of unsolicited public comment during their meetings are wise to adopt a policy and spell out procedures to effectively manage that process."

Note it doesn't say that boards "may never allow" comments; it offers advice for boards "that opt to."

It suggests boards can set aside time for comments, have a signup sheet, limit the speaking time with a timer, and specify that "comments about school personnel are off-limits, and board members won't respond to statements or questions."

All of which the Eureka Springs School Board used to do in years past.

And now it chooses not to.

Why?

As a former mayor of Eureka Springs said in a public online forum recently, "To not allow public comment is not only unwise of any elected official, it's disrespectful of the people you represent. Politics 101."

Politics 101, indeed. Are you listening, school board?

Eureka Springs School District taxpayers are a passionate bunch. When they care about an issue -- and there are serious issues going on in this school district -- if at first they don't feel heard, they will get louder and louder until they are heard.

Interestingly enough, the School Boards handbook also states that 50 voters in the school district have, by signing a petition, the legal right to call the school board into session. And then they will be heard.

Are you listening, school board?

Misdemeanor trial set for former Russellville principal (The Courier, Russellville)

A former Russellville High School principal pleaded not guilty to possessing an instrument of crime via his attorney during Pope County District Court proceedings on April 30.

A June 4 trial date has been set for Samuel S. Ussery, 36, who was cited by Arkansas State Police for possession of an instrument of crime, a Class A misdemeanor, following a traffic stop on March 25. Ussery is also accused of failing to provide right-of-way to a law enforcement vehicle that had lights flashing.

"We are unsure about the nature of the instrument of crime," deputy prosecutor Jeff Chandler said Wednesday. "The item is still under investigation."

Possession of an instrument of crime, punishable by up to one year in jail and a fine of \$2,500, is defined as possessing "any instrument of crime with a purpose to employ it criminally."

Ussery has been on paid administrative leave from the Russellville School District since March, when Ussery submitted his resignation effective June 30. He cited infirmity as the reason for his resignation and was then hired as principal at Carlisle High School in April, a position Ussery has since resigned, Carlisle superintendent Jason Clark said Wednesday.

"The ongoing health and emotional issues that I have experienced this past year due to illness and the death of my father have not been remedied leaving me unable to take on a new challenge," Ussery wrote in a letter to the faculty and staff of Carlisle High School.

"Mr. Clark and I both agreed that coming to Carlisle in my current condition is not best for the faculty, staff, and students of Carlisle High."

Clark said he will present Ussery's resignation to the Carlisle School Board at its monthly meeting Monday.

Grade school cancels graduation after anonymous complaint about prayer (Radio Station KIX104, Fayetteville)

The Riverside School District in Lake City, Arkansas, has canceled its 6th-grade graduation ceremony after a parent protested over the inclusion of Christian prayer in the festivities. After officials received a letter from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on the behalf of the parent, the event was canceled.

Parents who revere the traditional ceremony found themselves surprised and frustrated by the development. One parent, Kelly Adams, said that prayer had never been an issue before and that the cancellation has some people in the district very upset.

"As Christians and a mainly Christian town I think, there were a lot of people hurt that our rights were taken away," Adams told KAIT-TV. "My daughter graduated last year from 6th grade and my son is graduating this year from 6th grade, and we had a pastor open our ceremony and my daughter actually closed the ceremony in prayer."

While parents understand that the district made the best decision it could at the time, she also decried the notion that rights would be taken away from Christian parents and afforded to non-believers.

But Adams claims that all hope isn't lost. Rather than accept no graduation ceremony for their 6th graders, parents have another plan. They are getting together this week to find a church where the event can still be held. Collectively, they plan to host their own version of the graduation — and it's open to everyone, regardless of belief — so that student achievement can be properly recognized, KAIT-TV reports.

"We are including everyone, everyone is invited, we want everyone to come and be a part of it," Adams continued. "We're not trying to be pushy or ugly to anybody, we just want them to know there is a God who loves them."

Starnes reports that it was the Freedom of Religion Foundation (FFRF), a church-state separatist group, that sent a letter to officials. It's unclear if two separate letters were sent by the ACLU and the FFRF, but this would not be the first time that the two groups have intervened simultaneously on a First Amendment issue.

"It makes no difference how many families want prayer or wouldn't be offended by prayer at their graduation ceremony," FFRF attorney Patrick Elliott wrote in his letter to the Riverside School District. "The Supreme Court has settled this matter — school graduations must be secular to protect the freedom of conscience of all students."