

Dear Newton Students, Parents and Caregivers:

After many long months of negotiations with the Newton Teachers' Association (NTA), we come to you with an update.

Educator contracts contain provisions about union member pay, working conditions, benefits and rules. Our current contract with the NTA expires on August 31, 2023. Typically, negotiations with the union last a long time and are very complex; current negotiations have been ongoing for 9 months. Media and community discussions often boil the negotiations down to "How big is the cost of living adjustment (COLA) the NTA will receive?" and "How expensive are benefits?" However, there are many aspects of the contract that provide benefits to members that also have significant costs. Further, changes made to contracts enhance the professional lives of teachers, protects their time and improves quality of working conditions.

Many good ideas have been shared between the NTA, school administration and School Committee members. We have made progress on the following areas, which are called "tentative agreements" around which NTA, administrators and School Committee agree that the items improve the profession and serve Newton's children well:

- paying teachers who substitute teach for other absent teachers (vs. canceling classes)
- enhancing parental leave benefits
- increasing tuition reimbursement for staff pursuing additional education and recertification
- protecting Newton staff's benefit to bring their own children to school in NPS
- providing a scale and mechanism for substitute coverage and substitute pay advancement
- providing avenues for paraprofessional pay advancement
- enhancing retirement notice incentives
- clarifying work hours and work from home policies
- piloting expanded elementary preparatory time while studying how we can make further improvements to the elementary school day
- expanding the use of sick days for care of a family member or dear friend
- adding Juneteenth for all units as a holiday
- creating a teacher evaluation committee to revise current system

Each of these tentative agreements helps our staff and is a benefit to the education profession. We are proud of moving toward these agreements with our union colleagues and partners.

However, as many of you know, challenging budgets have required us to cut valued positions and programs in each of the last two years. We have been unable to come to agreement with the NTA on the rate of future pay increases. Despite many proposals and counter-proposals, we are very far apart—deeply far apart—in both how teachers are compensated when they increase their years of service by a year (step) and what they receive as a cost of living adjustment (COLA) on top of that.

The students of Newton are our first priority. Our role is to ensure a sustainable budget for the future that can support the district's financial needs including compensation. There is always a tension between the amount of staff we can retain and the increases for all staff within our budget. One of our highest priorities is to preserve existing staffing levels and programs—doing so results in improved class sizes, more electives and arts programs, and more support to the average classroom and building; we also desire strong compensation for all of our staff.

When a union/management/school committee team reaches an impasse, as we have now, school committees may file for mediation with the state. The state then works with the parties to try to reach additional agreements. If that is unsuccessful, the parties can go through additional defined steps. We are at that point and have notified the NTA of our intention to file for mediation.

However, it has been shared with us that the NTA is already planning work stoppages and actions for the fall. We are working with our new superintendent and her leadership team to do everything possible to ensure a smooth opening of school in September. Our children have had too many disruptions in their schooling in recent years, and we aim to open the year with all the services, support, joy and academic seriousness students need and deserve.

We write to alert you that, depending on the dynamics and actions regarding work stoppage actions, the school year may need to be extended for students in order to meet the DESE expectations for 180 school days and 900 (elementary)/990 (secondary) hours of instruction for our students. Families should plan that their children may have to attend school, depending on work stoppage impacts and potential snow days, up to June 30, 2024.

In addition, work stoppages and strikes are illegal in MA public schools, and the School Committee will have to file with the appropriate state commission regarding these actions. School Committees have a statutory obligation to seek to prevent these illegal actions.

More changes may come as we learn about how work stoppage actions may occur. We will be in touch frequently to update you on how this may impact you and your children. The Committee will work with Superintendent Nolin and her team to contend with changes to student schedules, busing, coverage, food services and school closures which may all require adjustments depending on the outcomes and tenor of mediation and any work stoppages by the NTA.

We remain committed to settling a fair contract for our educators.

Thank you,

Newton School Committee