

District pays for union leader

By Chad Livengood

She works for Jackson Public Schools, but often against its leaders.

Instead of reporting to a principal or administrator, longtime Jackson Education Association President Mary Lou Konkle reports to her 450-member teachers' union.

But taxpayers of the financially strapped district pay her \$55,721 yearly salary and \$29,261 benefits package.

As the 6,600-student district continues to lose pupils and lay off teachers each year, Konkle's full release from the classroom at district expense is rare among urban Michigan districts of similar size.

In fact, when compared with like-sized and larger districts, JPS is the only one that affords its teachers' union president with salary and benefits fully funded by taxpayers, Citizen Patriot research has found.

While some say the arrangement is justified by Konkle's role assisting with human-resource matters, critics contend the district shouldn't pay someone whose job includes negotiating labor contracts and representing teachers in grievance matters.

"It's a relic of the good financial times," said Justin King, executive director of Michigan Association of School Boards. "I'm betting the district had a lot less financial woes (then) than they do now."

In recent weeks, Konkle has been busy investigating vacancies for teachers facing layoffs expected to be announced at Monday's school board meeting.

"With all the shuffling that had to be done in elementary schools ! I was always in favor (of the district paying Konkle)," said Ed Brown, a recently retired Jackson High School geography and history teacher of 38 years.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association, the JEA's statewide union affiliate, said having a full-time local union president tends to save districts time and money that is required to deal with grievances.

But she also said full-time, paid release for union presidents is more common in larger districts such as Flint, Grand Rapids, Lansing and Kalamazoo.

During past contract talks between the district and JEA, Konkle's paid leave has come up. Superintendent Dan Evans admits he balked at taking on the union over who pays Konkle because he feared it could create a stalemate.

"That was one thing we gave in on," Evans said. "It has not been one of our highest priorities in bargaining."

Konkle's sixth two-year term expires next year, as does the current JEA labor contract.

In King's mind, there is only one way to change things.

"You've got to stiffen your backbone and get it out," said King, an attorney who used to negotiate teacher contracts.

Uncommon setup

As the Michigan economy soured and state funding began to dry up five years ago, Muskegon Public Schools scrapped a part-time leave for its union president.

Like Jackson, the Muskegon district of 5,749 students and 379 teachers has seen large enrollment loss and layoffs in recent years, officials said.

Bay City Public Schools (9,400 students), Battle Creek Public Schools (7,800 students) and Ypsilanti Public Schools (4,100 students) each split the cost of full-time release with the union.

There are 700 teachers in Port Huron Area Schools serving approximately 11,400 students. That district pays its union president's benefits and preparation period. The union foots the rest of the bill, a school official said.

Monroe Public Schools, a 6,900-student district, provides its union leaders only a few hours per year for association release time.

"We do not provide any benefit to the union president," said Terry Serbin, assistant superintendent of personnel, adding that a lot of classroom money is diverted "with a perk like that."

In Jackson County, full-time leave for a teachers union president isn't rare. But taxpayer-supported union presidents are.

Pamela Schultz, president of the Jackson County Education Association, a group representing all 32 MEA-affiliated teacher unions in the county, including JEA, is on full leave of absence from the Columbia School District. The JCEA reimburses Columbia for Schultz's cost as a teacher on leave.

To some, taxpayer-subsidized union presidents are emblematic of the fiscal and bureaucratic issues plaguing public schools.

"It is a by-product of collective bargaining in our public schools," said Tom Washburne, director of labor policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a conservative Midland think tank. "We're trying to run the public schools like they're factories."

What her job entails

Konkle, a 31-year district veteran, was a social studies and English teacher at Jackson High School before becoming JEA president 11 years ago. She started with a part-time leave of absence, which had been in the contract for as long as she'd been with the district.

After a couple of years, when the union decided the president's job required full-time attention, it became a second career for the 1997 JPS co-educator of the year.

Konkle, 58, said dues-paying JEA members pay half her annual pension contribution, which would be about 9 percent of her salary this year, or \$5,336.

While the district retreated from its proposal to shift Konkle's pay to the union during collective bargaining last year, Konkle agreed to do two hours of work a day for the district, heading a mentoring program for younger teachers.

Konkle said she already was coordinating professional development and mentoring prior to the 2005 concession.

"Most of my time is spent problem-solving," she said.

Konkle also stands guard on her union's contract to ensure that teachers facing pink slips can bump into vacant positions.

Without her services, the district likely would violate the contract, Konkle said.

"Part of my job," she said, "is to be watchdog."