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Spokane teachers pack school board meeting to express frustration over effects of budget cuts

Thu., Sept. 26, 2019, 5 a.m.



The Spokane Public Schools district office at Main Avenue and Bernard Street is seen Tuesday, Sept. 24, 2019. (Jesse Tinsley / The Spokesman-Review)

			
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Spokane Public Schools board members got an earful Wednesday night from

the head of the local teachers union, who said teachers are frustrated with large class sizes and tight staffing in several key areas.

Those issues are “having a negative effect on the health and safety of our students and our members, and this, in turn, impedes their academic potential,” said Jeremy Shay, president of the Spokane Education Association, which represents teachers and other certificated and classified staff.

Shay was the only speaker, but he was backed by about 200 teachers and other staff, most wearing red T-shirts and carrying “Union Strong” placards as they packed the board room.

The show of strength appeared to be a surprise to the district, and Shay said the union turnout was a “last-minute thing.”

Shay offered a counterpoint to a presentation on Sept. 11 from school principals, who said the school year was off to a strong start despite the effects of budget cuts.

At the same time, Shay noted that the board and the union have yet to reach a contract or tentative agreement for the current school year.

That “continues to add to the uncertainty, stress and frustration that we are experiencing,” Shay said. “It is essential that we bring our members a tentative agreement at our general membership meeting on Oct. 8.”

However, Brian Coddington, the district’s director of communications and public relations, said that contract negotiations were delayed at the union’s request.

“We’ve been very diligent about offering proposals and counterproposals,” Coddington said.

Shay noted several major problems:

Large class sizes for fourth through 12th grades and special education, which he said are “larger than ever” and are affecting the individual attention “all those students deserve.”

Custodians are “struggling mightily” to clean buildings following staff reductions.

Nutrition service workers are “strained to deliver meals due to their reductions in hours,” which is impacting the meal time for students.

Reduced special education staffing, which has resulted in teachers and para-educators “being moved across the system, creating chaos for students who have long-term trusting relationships with those who work with them.”

Coddington said the district is doing its best in tough circumstances.

“While I don’t think it’s anybody’s expectation or idea that this is the ideal situation, definitely we’ve seen students, and families and staff be resilient and make the most of a situation that’s not ideal,” Coddington said. “The district has put the focus on student learning, which is where it needs to be.”

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