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Tiny school district dumps the WEA

By DONNA GORDON BLANKINSHIP
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SEATTLE - Teachers in the tiny Sprague-Lamont School District have decided they won't be using the Washington Education Association to negotiate their next contract.

As a matter of fact, after severing ties to the union last month, the 15 teachers in the district about 50 southwest of Spokane decided to forgo negotiating entirely and just kept the old contract that expired Aug. 31 for another year.

The conservative Evergreen Freedom Foundation applauds this action as the beginning of a teacher revolution against the powerful WEA. But the union's leaders call it an anomaly.

"We will work to welcome these folks back and have an honest discussion about the value of a local, state and national voice," said Charles Hasse, president of the statewide association.

Hasse and other union officials said they expected teachers in Sprague-Lamont's three schools to return to as soon as they realize how difficult it is to represent themselves.

But Jim Dishon, president of the new local bargaining unit and a high school science, math and art teacher, said most of the teachers in Sprague-Lamont have decided they don't need the union's services, even though they were mostly non-members who didn't pay dues. "They were negotiating for us for free, but you didn't really have a say in what they were negotiating. Some of us felt we were not represented," said Dishon, who describes himself as a conservative opposed to unions.

Nine of the district's teachers have joined Northwest Professional Educators, which provides nonbargaining support services including liability insurance for \$144 a

year for new members or \$169 for others. The organization based in Spokane has 278 members in Washington state, according to executive director Cindy Omlin.

The group is affiliated with the Association of American Educators, an anti-union group that calls itself an "alternative to the partisan politics and non-educational agendas of the teacher labor unions."

The Washington Education Association, with 78,000 members, negotiates contracts in 285 of the state's 296 school districts, as well as offering liability insurance and legal support. The union charges about \$650 in yearly dues, but doesn't feel a threat, Hasse said.

"They have been organizing in Washington state for four years. This is the extent to what they can point to ... after four years and many thousands of dollars," Hasse said. Sprague-Lamont's lone remaining union member, Linda Laney, said the move had been coming for about seven years, as Sprague-Lamont membership in the Washington Education Association has dwindled. And she doesn't see her colleague reversing course.

"I'm not saying that it's not a possibility in the future, but I don't have a feeling that's going to happen anytime soon," said Laney, who teaches math, science, social studies and physical education in the middle school.

Dishon said the decision to decertify was not political, but the Evergreen Freedom Foundation argues that politics was the crux of the issue.

"The National Education Association and its local affiliate, the Washington Education Association, disrespect teachers by overcharging for collective

bargaining in order to finance a radical political agenda that is out of line with the views of a majority of teachers," said Michael Reitz, director of the foundation's Labor Policy Center.

Hasse said the union knows teachers are not always unanimous in their opinions about issues affecting public schools, but the WEA regularly surveys its members to make sure their lobbying represents majority views. "There's broad support for the agenda we're pursuing," he said.

Along with its lobbying effort, the WEA's political action committee contributes heavily to various Democratic candidates. Teacher union decertifications are rare.

In 2001, a small charter school in Michigan voted to dissociate with the Michigan Education Association one year after the school opened. According to the Association of American Educators, a small district in Oklahoma decertified at the end of last school year and teachers at a district of 33 teachers in Iowa left their state union in 2002.

Omlin said other small Washington districts also were considering decertification, and pointed to the Colton School District. She said Tim Sperber, who teaches English and social studies and is the athletic administrator at Colton High School, is spearheading the effort. Sperber said, however, that the possibility of decertification is way off on the horizon.

He quit paying dues to the statewide union last year and joined Northwest Professional Educators, to save money and because he feels a lot of union money goes into the Democratic Party and he is a Republican.

"We've just started looking at options," Sperber said. Of the 16 teachers in the district, five or six have joined the non-union organization.

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