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SACS teachers ponder split from state union

By Kelly Soderlund
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The union representing teachers in Southwest Allen County Schools might allow its members to disassociate from the state and national unions in order to spend dues locally.

Members of the Southwest Allen County Schools Teachers Association are scheduled to vote April 26 on whether to remain contracted with the Indiana State Teachers Association and the National Education Association.

But even if the union as a whole breaks away from the two organizations, individual teachers will still have the option of continuing to pay dues and remain members of the state and national unions to receive their services.

“There is support, and there is dissention,” said Southwest Allen union President Denny Sprunger, who is spearheading the effort. “There is a fear of what happens if we do this?”

The idea came about to give teachers a choice for where their money goes, Sprunger said. According to the Southwest Allen union Web site, 240 teachers pay \$614 each year in dues; more than \$88,000 is sent to the Indiana State Teachers Association; and more than \$30,000 is sent to the National Education Association. About \$4,100 remains with the Southwest Allen County Schools Teachers Association.

Having more local money could allow union officers to be paid for their time, Sprunger said. It could also pay for new programs and conferences to help teachers, he said.

“What we have to do is understand that we can try this and experiment and grow on our own, and if it fails, we have the opportunity to join the (unions again),” Sprunger said.

Sprunger, a teacher at Summit Middle School who’s been in the district for 17 years and in teaching for 28 years, thinks the switch will encourage more non-union members to join. SACS teachers are not required to join the district’s union and more than 220 teachers have chosen not to.

“I anticipate picking up additional members,” Sprunger said.

But Mike Schmid, who holds an officer position within the Southwest Allen union, sees it differently.

“I have real mixed feelings about it,” said Schmid, an art teacher at Homestead High School who has taught in the district for 22 years. “I think that most people have real mixed feelings about what to do.”

Schmid believes the Indiana State Teachers Association and National Education Association have been positive forces in education and feels teachers should continue to support them.

The SACS union does not use an Indiana State Teachers Association representative to handle its salary negotiations with SACS administrators and hasn't for five years, Sprunger said. The union has had little contact with the state and national unions for any issue, he said.

A representative from the Indiana State Teachers Association could not be reached for comment.

Sprunger has lead six meetings on the issue since March with between 20 and 100 people present at each one.

School principals and administrators, including Superintendent Brian Smith, have also attended.

"We'll work with the association however they organize, so we support them and we have a great working relationship with them," Smith said. "Whatever they do we're

going to continue a working relationship with them. That won't affect the way I deal with them."

Sprunger is also not concerned that teachers will find themselves in a situation where they might need the assistance of the union in opposition to the administration or school board. There will always be someone from the current administration or board present to remind any newcomers of the current situation, he said.

"There is an understanding between the board, the administration, the teachers union that what we have going here is a very good thing," Sprunger said. "Our collaborative problem solving process is something we all find of high value. Nobody wants to upset that delicate balance of a positive relationship that we have working."

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