

Lincoln teachers vote to unionize

April 6, 2006

The Lincoln School Board and Supt. of Schools Kathy Heisler were surprised last week when they received word that Lincoln teachers had voted to unionize. By a vote of 82 percent, Lincoln School Certified Teachers have voted to affiliate with Montana Education Association-Montana Federation of Teachers (MEA- MFT). Some 16,000 strong, MEA-MFT is the largest union in Montana representing teachers and public employees.

The Lincoln School Board called a special meeting Tuesday night to meet with teachers and union representatives to clarify how to proceed with teacher negotiations and bargaining sessions. School Board Trustee Bridgitt Erickson admitted she knew very little about unions saying, "This is a whole new mental process as we're inexperienced with unions. Kathy Heisler stated she was taken by surprise and perhaps starting off on the wrong foot due to a lack of timely notification but said, "I don't have a problem with you organizing and getting the benefits you deserve."

Jane Fields, Field Consultant for MEA-MFT, was available to explain to the Board some of the member benefits to teachers and guidelines now to be followed with teacher negotiations. "Very few teachers in Montana are not part of MEA-MFT," she said, "approximately 90 percent." The member benefits offered to a professional staff, besides bargaining power, include insurance, educational workshops, professional development and assistance in work related problems.

In a somewhat confrontational atmosphere for the meeting, several teachers spoke up explaining the process to unionize has been in the works for a number of years. Lincoln teacher Kris Jacobsen said the intent was not to blindside the Board and administration. "We're not unhappy with the way we've been treated, she said, and do understand your perspective (of suspicion). We want this to be a good working relationship."

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