

## OUR VIEW

# Cool rhetoric on school talks

**T**he labor peace Volusia County schools have enjoyed the last two years is about to end. But it doesn't have to be replaced by the level of acrimony that preceded it.

Negotiations on a new contract between the school district and the teachers union begin next week, the first time the two sides have met at the bargaining table since a rare, two-year deal was struck in July 2016.

That agreement bought a two-year respite from what had been a bitter two years of contract battles, each of which resulted in impasses. The last round of negotiations included an unfair labor complaint filed by the union, a rancorous demonstration by teachers at a School Board meeting, and some board members firing back with sharp criticism of the tactics.

Even before the latest round of bargaining has begun, Volusia United Educators has fired opening shots. Union president Andrew Spar has complained the district delayed talks until after the Legislature ended its session in March, and that the district has hired an outside attorney to conduct negotiations. He says that indicates the district is "not going to bargain in good faith."

Fish gotta swim, and union leaders have to energize the troops. Still, those criticisms are misguided, and serve only to set a bad tone for the talks.

It doesn't make sense for the district to come to the table until it knows exactly what Tallahassee has left it to negotiate. And as usual, it's a glass half-empty.

Republican leaders boasted that they increased per-pupil spending for next year by more than \$400 million. But that elides the fact that virtually all of that money is earmarked for improving school security and for expanding a voucher program to include students who have been bullied. Strip away those mandates, and per pupil spending for general purposes will increase by a scant 47 cents in 2018-19. That's the extra amount each district will have to address teacher salaries, among many other rising expenses.

Before the legislative session started, Gov. Rick Scott had requested an additional \$200 per student, which districts could have spent as they chose. But Parkland happened, and legislative priorities suddenly changed. That's why you wait until after the sausage comes out of the factory.

It's also why teacher ire at the district is largely misplaced. That's not to excuse or overlook every annoying diktat from DeLand that adds to teacher workloads or detracts from their core classroom duties. But more could be accomplished, from the district's and the union's side, if the state cut a lot of the strings it attaches to education dollars and funded schools at a higher level.

That change can only occur at the state level, and it begins with who local voters send to Tallahassee. Teachers union passion should be focused on those elections, as well as on School Board races, both of which would have more impact at the negotiating table.

As for hiring a Tampa attorney, School Board member John Hill told The News-Journal's Erica Breunlin, "You don't want to have negotiations where you have people with personality conflicts because they interact all the time." However, it's worth reminding both sides that the last bargaining stalemate was broken during a personal phone conversation between Spar and Superintendent Tom Russell while the latter was stuck in traffic on Interstate 4. That led to a face-to-face meeting between the two men a week later, and shortly thereafter a new two-year deal was hammered out.

Remembering that dynamic could make for a shorter, and less contentious, contract negotiation this time.