

Tewksbury wants to pay school chief for success**By Rick Epstein****August 05, 2009, 1:50PM**

TEWKSBURY TWP. -- More than six months after the Tewksbury Township Board of Education agreed to hire William Petrick as a permanent chief school administrator and principal, a contract for that position has yet to be signed.

Under new state regulations, the state superintendent of Hunterdon schools must review contracts for superintendents, assistant superintendents and business personnel.

Petrick has been interim superintendent since July 1, 2008 while also serving as principal. The board agreed on Jan. 14 to make the arrangement permanent and voted to begin negotiations for a new contract. Petrick's original appointment was for six months and expired on Dec. 31. The interim contract was then extended several times, including most recently at the July 22 board meeting. The latest extension is good until the end of this month.

State law now requires state approval of school contracts. Petrick and the board have completed negotiations, but the state does not approve of the bonus structure proposed by the board, which calls for separate bonuses based upon performance. Michael Stefkovich, chairman of the negotiations committee, said at the July 22 meeting. The board has filed an appeal with the state commissioner of education and also wrote to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan hoping he will help plead their case with the state.

The state thinks the bonuses are too generous, Stefkovich said. He said the proposed pay structure could actually save the district money while improving the education the children are getting. Under previous contracts, the superintendent usually received a 6% annual raise on average. The actual dollar amount of the raise increases each year because the percentage is figured against the total salary. Under Tewksbury's current proposal, the superintendent's base salary would remain flat over the life of the contract. One-time bonus payouts would be given provided the superintendent met certain goals set forth by the board. One goal is to keep the school budget flat for the next school year. If the superintendent succeeds, he would get a bonus but the taxpayers won't see any increase in their burden, Stefkovich said. Other goals include improving curriculum, technology or enrichment programs. Although the federal secretary of education openly supports merit bonuses in schools and suggests that such rewards may be eligible for federal stimulus funds, Gov. Jon Corzine does not, Stefkovich, said. "We truly believe in reforming education and tying results into pay," he said.

Dr. Chrys Harttraft, interim superintendent of Hunterdon schools, said she could not discuss the matter since it is in litigation. She didn't know when the district's appeal would be addressed.

Mike Yaple, spokesman for the New Jersey School Boards Association, said merit-based contracts are not uncommon, although the association does not keep track of how many there are now. He said typically the contracts include a cost-of-living raise and then bonuses based on performance.

Yaple had not heard of other districts facing the same situation as Tewksbury, but expects to see more district decisions get "vetoed" by the county superintendants as time goes on. The procedure of having the state contract reviews was only created within the last year, so it is still fairly new, he said. The new regulations allow bonus payments based on a "measurable" achievement of goals.

Yaple also said he expects other administrators may be motivated to agree to merit-based pay once it becomes popular with more superintendants.