

Education Insider: Teachers union can't back Columbus school-board incumbents without pact

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The Columbus teachers union has put its stamp of approval on two school-board candidates in a three-seat race. Neither one is an incumbent.

Candidates Mike Cole and Dominic Paretti get the Columbus Education Association's thumbs up.

But that leaves incumbents Hanifah Kambon, Ramona Reyes and Mike Wiles in the cold. It's nothing personal, the union president says.

"It's not that I'm saying Ramona Reyes would not make a good school-board member, but we have an expired contract. Our policy is we can't make endorsement for school-board incumbents when we don't have an agreement in place," said union President Rhonda Johnson. "We're not speaking to their qualifications as board members."

The teachers union doesn't have a new contract. The one that expired near the end of August remains in place until a new agreement is reached.

The candidates were screened through Teachers for Better Schools, the political-action arm of the union.

The CEA endorsement stands in contrast to the Franklin County Democratic Party's official faves, too. The Democrats like *four* candidates for the three seats. In addition to CEA-backed Cole and Paretti, they're behind Kambon and Reyes.

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Meanwhile, some candidates running for school boards elsewhere have passed up interviews for union endorsements, claiming a conflict of interest.

A team of three challengers running for the Westerville school board — Jim Burgess, Luke Davis and John Sodt — and Marc Schare, an incumbent in Worthington schools, opted out of screenings by district teachers unions.

The candidates pointed out that, if elected, they could end up opposite those unions at a negotiating table, with costly labor contracts at stake.

"The Worthington community needs to know that any decisions I make have not been influenced by your endorsement or a campaign contribution," Schare wrote the Worthington union president.

"The only way to absolutely guarantee that is to not participate in this process."

The four candidates aren't the first to forgo the endorsement process over those concerns. Two candidates in Westerville made the same decision in 2011. One of them, Carol French, was elected without the union seal of approval.

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This is the space we reserved to write about local schools named as National Blue Ribbon Schools by the U.S. Department of Education.

The list was released yesterday. But there weren't many in Ohio (just 15), and only one was local. So, kudos to St. Paul School in Westerville. It earned a ribbon because all types of students there are high-achieving.

Public schools earn the honor when they're either high-achieving or improving even though at least 40 percent of their students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. Several local schools have earned the honor before, but just one this year.

Dispatch Reporter Collin Binkley contributed to this column.

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2013/09/25/union-cant-back-incumbents-without-pact.html>