

PEMBROKE PINES

Charter teachers vote to go union

Teachers at the seven-school Pembroke Pines charter system voted to join the Broward Teachers Union Wednesday.

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Pembroke Pines charter schoolteachers overwhelmingly voted Wednesday to join the Broward Teachers Union, a move that could inspire union drives at other charter schools.

About 80 percent -- 181 to 46 -- were in favor of creating a unit of the BTU, the union that represents teachers in the Broward School District.

The vote, overseen by officials from the state Public Employees Relations Commission, affects about 300 employees of the seven-school city-run charter school system, including teachers, guidance counselors and other professional staff.

Union officials said they believe the Pines schools are the first charter school teachers to unionize in Florida.

"I suspect in the months and years ahead we will be looking at a lot of charters," said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the state affiliate for BTU.

The teachers must decide individually whether to join the union. In Florida, workers aren't required to join unions to receive the pay that unions negotiate.

It could take a year for BTU to negotiate a contract between the city of Pembroke Pines and the teachers, BTU spokesman John Ristow said.

CHARTER PHILOSOPHY

The charter school philosophy -- a streamlined bureaucracy that can funnel resources more efficiently into classrooms -- may have to stretch to embrace union demands that teachers have more control over their working conditions.

Pay was not the motivating factor behind the Pembroke Pines drive, union officials said. In fact, mid-career teachers in the Pines charter system earn more than their counterparts in traditional Broward schools. A few teachers who watched as the votes were counted Wednesday evening said they want a voice in policies at the schools.

For example, the employee handbook states that the school may change the rules at any time. Teachers said they want a right to negotiate policies on everything from how often they get paid in the summer to representation for teachers facing discipline.

"If a teacher gets in trouble for whatever reason, there is no due process," said Liz Fisher, a first-grade teacher.

Also, teachers want the same rules at all seven schools and the assurance that policies won't change if their principal or City Manager Charlie Dodge leaves.

The teachers won't pay dues until they have a contract. Current BTU dues are about \$600 a year.

Teachers at several other charter schools in Broward have contacted BTU expressing interest in unionizing, said Ristow, who declined to name the schools.

Such union drives may not be warmly endorsed by some charter school operators.

A union request for higher salaries could create a problem, said Jon Hage, president of Charter Schools USA, which operates 15 campuses across Florida including three in Broward.

"If a school was forced to pay for additional costs it otherwise couldn't afford, I think it could impact the viability of the school," Hage said.

But the decision to unionize rests with the teachers.

'THE BACKBONE'

"If a charter school is for-profit, then it is possible that down the road the operators of that particular charter school might have to look at sharing a larger portion of their profit with the people who make up the backbone of the school and are in the classrooms every day making a positive difference for our students," Ristow said.

No charter school unionizing drives are under way or planned by United Teachers of Dade, union president Karen Aronowitz said.