

Easton Area district hires lawyer for contract negotiations



By Rudy Miller | For lehighvalleylive.com

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The Easton Area School Board hired a labor attorney Tuesday as a deadline approaches to broker an important teachers' contract.

Ellis Katz has more than 30 years of experience in labor law, and his firm helped negotiate the first contracts that gave teachers the right to strike 45 years ago. The firm Sweet, Stevens, Katz & Williams has negotiated more than 600 contracts, its website says.

Superintendent John Reinhart said Katz will advise the district on all of its contract negotiations, not just for the teachers. He will earn \$195 an hour, Reinhart said.

The teachers' contract is due to expire in August 2016. It comes after teachers agreed to re-open their contract in 2014 and accept a two-year wage freeze in order to avoid 72 teacher layoffs. That came after 72 teacher layoffs in 2010 and 49 in 2012.

Administrators say problems date back to the multi-year deal brokered in 2007, which allowed higher-than-anticipated raises, particularly for teachers who pursued advanced degrees. Salary costs went up more than 69 percent between 2007-08 and 2014-15, administrators have said.

Administration and union officials told lehighvalleylive.com in March they are hopeful for productive negotiations in advance of the deadline.

They're required by law to meet by January 2016. Union President Julia Miles said in March she hopes to meet with the school board before that. She didn't return an email seeking comment.

School Board President Frank Pintabone anticipates a meeting soon with teachers.

"We have not met yet. We have a few contracts coming up at the same time, so we want to cross all of our t's and dot all of our i's prior to sitting down. It will be soon though," Pintabone said in an email.

Rudy Miller may be reached at rmiller@lehighvalleylive.com. Follow him on Twitter @RudyMillerLV. Find Easton area news on Facebook.



From left, Easton Area School District Chief Operating Officer Michael Simonetta, board President Frank Pintabone and Superintendent John Reinhart. (Sue Beyer | Lehighvalleylive.com file photo)



Labor attorney Ellis Katz.