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JAMAICA PLAIN

## Make-up time owed at 2 JP schools not yet set; 3 weeks left in year

Posted by Matt Rocheleau June 1, 2012 03:58 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

With less than three weeks before the academic year ends, two Jamaica Plain schools have yet to determine when they will make up 12 hours of learning time that has been owed since the schools' openings were delayed last September.

Leaders of the Boston Teachers Union blame the Boston Public School Department for not having scheduled the make-up time – amounting to two school days – sooner. School department officials say the union's request for additional compensation for staff has slowed an announcement.

The James W. Hennigan Elementary School and the West Zone Early Learning Center, which enroll more than 650 K-5 students combined in the same Jamaica Plain facility, started their academic years on Sept. 12., two school days after other Boston students began classes.

The schools' openings were delayed in order to complete work to remove trace amounts of a toxin in the building's old, flaking paint.

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“This isn’t really a normal situation,” city school department spokesman Matthew Wilder said. “We recognize the end of the school year is fast approaching.”

“We have an obligation to make sure students get 180 days and get these hours in. A decision will be made as soon as possible,” he said.

Wilder said the school department e-mailed the teachers union on Sept. 2 – one day after the two schools learned they would be opening late.

In a copy of that brief e-mail from Brendan M. Green, a labor counsel for the city school department, to the union’s vice president, Patrick Connolly, Green says: “The thinking here is still that we would tack on the additional days at the end of the school year. That option is obviously fraught with downside and we would certainly be open to talking about other options.”

Wilder said that e-mail was the beginning of talks between the school department and the union.

But Richard Stutman, the union’s president, said the school department never followed up from that e-mail on the issue of scheduling make-up time until late April, when West Zone Early Learning Center principal Kathleen Sullivan sent an e-mail that included a list of recommended make-up dates.

The school department spokesman said he cannot say with certainty when between September and April the school department and union spoke about scheduling make-up dates, but he said the talks have been ongoing since September.

“We communicate very often with the Boston Teachers Union on a variety of things,” he said. “We were attempting to negotiate with the teachers union. It’s certainly not something that came at the last minute for us.”

But the union president asserts that “there was no conversation in between.”

“They’ve been seriously asleep on this,” Stutman said. And, if school department officials say otherwise, he said they are being “totally disingenuous. They’re flat-out lying and should be ashamed.”

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He said initiating the rescheduling process was solely the school department's responsibility.

"It's their school; it's their schedule," Stutman said. "It really is irresponsible. And this is typical of how they do business."

The school department spokesman said the scheduling delay is being caused by the union's request for additional compensation for when staff worked to ready the schools before they opened. But, Wilder said that "teachers always volunteer before schools open ... across the district across the state," to prepare their classrooms.

"It seems all the union is interested in taking about is the money," Wilder said. "I think this is a typical strategy by the union."

The union president acknowledged that the union is trying to get compensation for some of the time teachers put in voluntarily before the school's opening to help clean and ready the building.

But, Stutman said, those negotiations just began this week and that the delay in scheduling make-up time "isn't an issue about pay or compensation. It's an issue about lackadaisical-ness [by the school department] and a lack of attention to details."

Stutman said that the make-up date proposal sent by the school principal in late April was informal, and that the union "didn't hear from [the school department] officially until [Tues. May 29]. They notified us with a verbal proposal."

The following day the school department sent a written proposal.

In a copy of that letter to the union, the school department says it will pay staff for the hours they worked voluntarily on the two days before the school opened.

The union responded in a letter Thursday demanding the school department talk further with the union about making sure staff will be properly compensated, if they have not been already, for time worked prior to the school's opening dating back to Aug. 15.

The letter proposes that the union and the school department meet on either

June 4 or June 7 to discuss the matter further.

With no snow days or other cancellations this academic year, Boston schools are scheduled to hold the final day of classes on June 21.

Stutman called scheduling days this late in the academic year “foolish and counterproductive.”

“These hours meant something months ago,” he said. “In late June, kids have other things on their minds,” like playing outdoors and the looming summer recess.

The school department said the district’s academic calendar “doesn’t have a lot of flexibility in it during the school year,” and that “the only real solution” was to make-up the learning time near the end of the school year.

“Ideally, we would have liked to announce it already,” Wilder said.

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