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Unions question health-care study Educators also wary of no-bid contract

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Author: Reginald Fields; Plain Dealer Bureau

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Columbus – A coalition of six Ohio school labor unions say a government study, already under way, of a proposed mandatory health-care pool for educators is illegal.

The unions also question a \$498,000 no-bid contract given to an international consulting firm with an office in Cleveland.

"Given the pay-to-play environment that we are already in, it doesn't seem prudent to be handing out such generous contracts practically behind the scenes," said Tom Mooney, of the Ohio Federation of Teachers.

The state budget contains plans for Ohio to study a mandatory health-care system for its 309,000 public school employees. Lawmakers say it will save school districts money. Teachers worry it could lead to higher costs and fewer benefits.

The law requires the governor, House speaker and Senate president to appoint a nine-member School Employees Health Care board. The board must then hire a consultant to conduct a feasibility study.

That board has not yet been named.

"I think, in looking at the code, that the government could have gotten ahead of itself this time," said Scott Borgemenke, Ohio House chief of staff.

"I don't disagree with their contention that the board was supposed to appoint the consultant, but I'm not going to concede to this pay-to-play stuff," he said, challenging the school unions to prove something sinister about the deal with Watson Wyatt.

The Department of Administrative Services, which hired Watson Wyatt, says a two-paragraph section elsewhere in the massive budget bill gives it the authority to hire the consulting firm.

It allows DAS to "hire an executive director and assistant" to help the board. That covers hiring a consultant, said Rick Frank, DAS' legislative liaison.

Frank also said that because the department has used Watson Wyatt before and was under a tight time frame for producing a report, it successfully asked the state controlling board to waive the competitive bidding process.

The law requires the health-care board to produce a report and make recommendations to the governor and General Assembly leaders by Dec. 31.

Frank is unsure if Watson Wyatt will have a report done by the deadline.

And, considering the board hasn't been appointed, Borgemenke said an extension will be needed to give the board time to do its work.

Mooney doesn't believe legislative leaders made such innocent oversights. He believes lawmakers had planned to name a board, hand that group a report from Watson Wyatt and do it all before next week's deadline.

Senate President Bill Harris, an Ashland Republican, insisted Wednesday that is not the case.

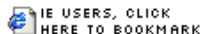
"That is why we insisted in the Senate that whatever decision the board makes has to come back to the full General Assembly for a vote before it can be implemented," Harris said.

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