

NESHAMINY

Teachers, district continue negotiations

Salary and health care remain the biggest outstanding issues, according to the board.

By **RACHEL CANELLI**
STAFF WRITER

As Neshaminy School District students start heading back to school, their teachers will be doing so without a new contract.

Although negotiations are continuing between the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers and the school board, no agreement has been reached, officials said.

"Things are really moving slowly," said union President Louise Boyd. "We're hopeful that the pace will pick up when we get back to school."

In June, neither side formally accepted a factfinder's recommended teacher labor contract so they resumed talks under stateappointed mediator Jill Leeds-Rivera.

That three-year proposed deal called for a 3 percent salary increase but no change to the health care package, under which the union does not contribute to its health care premiums, officials said.

Boyd claimed that the district is limiting any substantive face-to-face discussions, and the union has struggled to get health care information from the district.

But board member Ritchie Webb said the board has met with the teachers 10 times since January, including the fact-finding negotiations. Another bargaining session is scheduled for Sept. 3, according to Webb.

"The board will continue to act in good faith," he said.

Until a new pact is formed, the teachers will be working under the contract that expired at the end of June without any increases in salary.

"In my experience of sitting on both sides of these types of issues, they start out slow but as time goes on you get the movement going," said Webb. "Right now, insurance and salary are the big questions, as they always are. Both sides are still exploring different options at this point."

In June, the board previously offered a 1 percent salary increase, and asked teachers to pay 10 percent toward their health care the first year of the contract, 11 percent the second, and 12 percent the third. The board also wanted to increase class sizes, eliminate longevity pay and the retirement incentive, increase the steps on the salary schedule and increase the work days and hours, according to Neshaminy's Web site.

The NFT requested 4 percent salary increases with no change to health care premiums. The union also asked to reduce class sizes, increase the retirement incentive, prep periods, lessen case loads for social workers, and implement fullday kindergarten and elementary technology education, the district Web site said.

"The staff is ready to return to work ... to do our part to make sure in the end both sides end up with a fair and equitable contract," Boyd said. "We're all looking forward to doing the best for our students. We're hopeful that we'll come to some resolution ... and have a contract in the very near future."

Under the old deal, the average teacher salary is more than \$81,000. But since at least 50 teachers at the higher end of the 11-step pay scale retired this year with another 20 leaving in January, that figure is expected to decrease. The average starting teacher salary is \$51,976, when combined with experience and education, according to the district's human resources department.

The top salary, which requires a master's degree plus 30 credits, is approximately \$95,923, administrators said.

Although the teachers do not pay any percent of their health care premiums, they do pay \$15 for co-pays and \$5 and \$20 for generic and brand-name drugs, respectively, through Personal Choice, as reported by the district's human resources department.

Rachel Canelli can be reached at 215-949-4191 or .