

## School closings

## Difficult choices

*If the Neshaminy school board saves money by shedding schools, it also should shed costly free health benefits.*

You might think that only in a bean counter's mind could closing a school be a "pro-education" thing to do. But Neshaminy School District business administrator Joe Paradise makes a good case for the unseemly option.

Explaining the tough choice now confronting school members — close schools or raise taxes ... a lot — Paradise says closing a school or schools would preclude making a choice that would hurt education: eliminating or reducing programs.

"The better option is to consolidate facilities and maintain the same programs," Paradise explains, adding that a recent study determined that, with declining enrollment, the district has "significant overcapacity."

In regular English, Neshaminy has too many classrooms, which leads to this question: Does Neshaminy have too many teachers and administrators?

Apparently it does, because Paradise said an estimated 75 to 100 retiring staff members likely won't be replaced for the next school year. It's good to hear the school board will have some say over personnel even if streamlining staff would come through attrition and not pink slips.

Though Paradise couldn't say what they are, the procedural hoops the board would have to jump through to lay off teachers are numerous and cumbersome. So the board is fortunate that so many educators have reached retirement age. Of course, not replacing retirees will require closing schools. So it appears board members have almost no choice but to "consolidate" in order to improve efficiency and close the roughly \$15 million hole in next year's budget.

In the real world, businesses take whatever steps they need to take to improve the bottom line — including cutting the workforce or shedding fringe benefits and often both. The school board should seek similar authority in its next teachers contract, which is being negotiated now. Indeed, Neshaminy is the only school district in the county where teachers still do not contribute to the cost of their health benefits, though they do pay some deductibles.

That has to change and not just incrementally. The folks shouldering the cost of teachers' health benefits — taxpayers — on average are footing about 25 percent of the cost of their own benefits. That should be the milepost board members set their sites on.

With an average salary of nearly \$82,000 a year, Neshaminy teachers are the second highest paid in the state. And their yearly bumps, which include both contractual raises and so-called step increases, add up to a significant number. They can well afford to pick up a significant share of the cost of their health insurance.

Bottom line: If the community will have to do with less, so should teachers and administrators.