

NESHAMINY

## School-closing plan has parents fuming

*The board agreed to focus on one option: closing an elementary and middle school and the district's alternative school, which still left many parents concerned.*

By RACHEL CANELLI COURIER TIMES

Several hundred people packed Maple Point Middle School Wednesday night to hear the Neshaminy school board discuss options for closing schools.

Declining enrollment, revenues that can't keep up with expenses, a dwindling, unreliable savings account, a \$15 million deficit and a recent facilities study that found many of the district's buildings are underused have officials and administrators looking at closing buildings to cut costs and save money.

Although the board voted not to close an elementary or middle school in the next school year, people were still upset at the thought of closing any neighborhood schools at all.

Parents like Meg Offenback pleaded with the board not to close their community schools.

"[Samuel Everitt] is in the middle of a residential community," said Offenback, president of that school's PTO, to cheers. "What if you owned a home [there]. Put yourselves in our shoes. We don't want it. Please don't close."

She expressed concern that if Samuel Everitt Elementary was rented, it could increase traffic on streets where children ride their bikes and there are no sidewalks.

Offenback also said the leaving the building vacant could attract unwanted activity like vandalism.

A motion to talk about closing an elementary, or middle school, or both, in the 2008-09 school year failed 6-3 with only Richard Eccles, Frank Koziol and Ritchie Webb voting for it.

The majority of the board said although they would consider closing Tawanka, they did not want to commit to closing a certain elementary school without a redistricting study and plan.

"We need to find out who it's going to affect," said William Spitz, who also pointed out that the board waited to act on the facilities study until after the election.

Officials had already planned to close Neshaminy Middle School once the ninthgraders are moved to the high school in September 2009, which is in the middle of an \$82 million renovation and construction project.

Most of the board members, though, also agreed to close Tawanka in the next school year if that program could be housed elsewhere.

Before the meeting was moved from the boardroom into the auditorium, it was standing-room only. Parents, residents, students, teachers and administrators spilled out into the hallway to the front door of the Middletown school and administrative offices.

Several people complained, including a woman who refused to give her name but stood in front of the board table delaying the start of the meeting by demanding that the board reschedule the special meeting, or move the forum into a larger room to accommodate the crowd.

After those comments, the board adjourned and reconvened in the auditorium where there were fewer microphones and no district cameras to videotape the meeting.

Middletown police said Wednesday night they were called to the school during the meeting. Police arrived at the school, stayed a brief time and left. No arrests were made.

Board President Eccles apologized and said officials didn't expect the large crowd.

At that point, the board immediately narrowed down five options to one. Instead of considering building a new central elementary school, or realigning the grade levels, the members agreed to focus on renovating many schools and closing an elementary and a middle school and Tawanka Learning Center, Neshaminy's alternative school.

Neshaminy Middle School teacher Kevin Knowles received a standing ovation after his comments including a suggestion that the board get feedback from staff.

Knowles also mentioned to gasps from the audience that Superintendent Paul Kadri, who was not present at the meeting, was listed this week in an online article as one of three candidates for a superintendent position in the Plymouth-Canton district in Michigan.

Kadri has not publicly announced if he's leaving. The board did not comment.

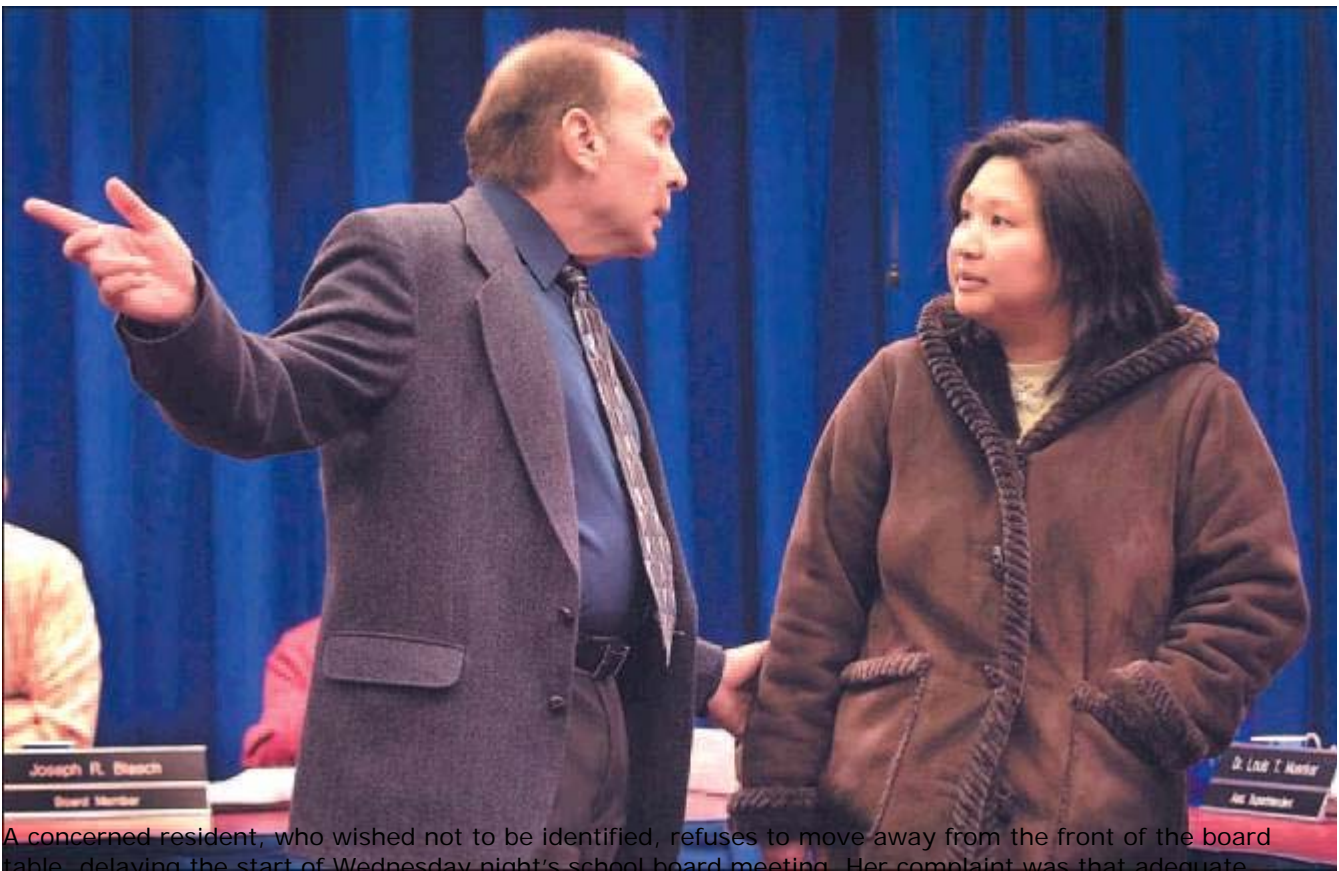
Regarding redistricting and closures, many residents added that they moved to Neshaminy for its schools like Oliver Heckman and Herbert Hoover elementary schools and requested more information.

People suggested creating a committee of parents and teachers and holding more open forums. Parents also asked officials and administrators to remember the impact on children with special needs.

Eccles reassured the audience that the board will do what's best for the community and the kids.

Assistant Superintendent Lou Muenker said he understood that closure and redistricting could be emotional.

"Not everyone will be pleased," he said. "It's fantastic that everyone loves their community school. But these [financial issues] are things the district can't ignore."



A concerned resident, who wished not to be identified, refuses to move away from the front of the board table, delaying the start of Wednesday night's school board meeting. Her complaint was that adequate space was not provided for the number of residents who showed up for the meeting, which was eventually moved into the Maple Point Middle School auditorium. PHOTOS BY BILL FRASER / **COURIER TIMES**

