



NESHAMINY

A school's fond farewell

With less than an hour to go on the last day, administrators found out that Neshaminy Middle School received more national recognition for its health initiatives.

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On the last day of school Wednesday morning, Neshaminy Middle School bus drivers looped around the parking lot with kids waving out the windows to their teachers lined up along the property as "Taps" was played on a trumpet.

"We miss you!" the children cried. Their teachers responded, "We love you!"

The send-off was more than just a way to end this school year. It was a way to say goodbye to Neshaminy Middle forever.

"It's a tough day," said teacher Gary Swangler about the school's closing for good. But it wasn't his worst.

A week ago, since it was raining, Swangler, who's taught technology to roughly 15,000 students at the school for the past 20 years, waited underneath the Neshaminy sign at the top of the steps, instead of greeting the kids at their buses.

"I was just standing there, looking at that sign, and ..." Swangler trailed off as tears streamed down his face. "This is just such a great school. It's a terrible way to end. I won't even get to finish [my last year before retiring] here. It's a family."

At 11:30 a.m. Wednesday morning, the bell tolled for the Middletown school.

When the dismissal buzzer echoed through the soon-to-be empty classrooms and hallways, it signified more than just the end of another school year. It rang for the last time that students and teachers would walk out the school's doors for another summer vacation.

And as they did, the award-winning Neshaminy Middle School Jazz Band played "Hey Jude" by The Beatles on the outside steps, reminding the pupils and educators to "Take a sad song and make it better."

After signing yearbooks and tasting ice cream and water ice, the students and teachers said goodbye with handshakes, high-fives and long, tearful embraces.

"Good luck," one teacher said. "Be safe this summer, OK? But have fun with your friends. Oh, and come visit me!"

Many of the kids and staff members, who grouped together for pictures, donned black T-shirts with the school's name, 1965-2008 and an electric blue flat line of a heart monitor.

"I didn't think I'd be sad, but I'm going to miss everyone and we really loved our school," said 14-year-old eighth-grader Carly Deeter.

Earlier this week, the Neshaminy school board voted to close the blue ribbon school to address budget concerns, declining enrollment and underutilized space throughout the district, administrators said.

It was originally called Neshaminy Junior High School. This was the middle school's 43rd year, officials said.

The school is known nationally for its health initiatives. With less than an hour to go before closing Wednesday, acting Principal Clarke Stoneback learned the school also reached bronze level status with the Pennsylvania Advocates for Nutrition and Activity and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation for trying to create a better building environment.

"The teachers did a topnotch job of focusing everyone," Stoneback said. "They really held it together. But it hit home Monday night [when the school board voted]. We know it's the right move for the district to move forward, but it's hard to swallow."

During his final announcement, Stoneback told the children to "look back with fond memories, remember the valuable lessons that have been learned. ... You will always be a part of the Neshaminy Middle family."

Nancy Ratner stopped by the school on her lunch hour to hear her daughter play in the band one last time.

"We were praying that it wasn't closing, but there was nothing we could do," she said as she looked at the building, wiped tears from her eyes and tried to console her weeping daughter. "It's been here so long. We're very close to the teachers. We just love them."

While a group of teens belted out the lyrics to Alice Cooper's "School's Out," one teacher wept and said, "That's all our babies."



Neshaminy Middle School science teacher Elaine Leventhal says a tearful goodbye to one of her students Wednesday, when the school closed its doors for good. KIM WEIMER/ **STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**