

Neshaminy contract talks

Unhealthy process

Neshaminy teachers should join the real world and start paying for health insurance — and contract talks should be open to the public.

Teacher contract talks are ongoing in the Neshaminy School District. In other words, there hasn't been much progress, and so teachers continue to work under the old, expired contract — which remains a pretty good deal.

According to a school board spokesman, health insurance is the stumbling block. The school board wants teachers to pay something for their taxpayer-funded health care plan. Teachers want to keep the status quo — meaning they don't want to pay anything other than the token deductibles they now pay for doctor's visits and prescriptions.

That's not the way it works in the real world and hasn't for a long time. Most people working private sector jobs contribute on average about 25 percent of the cost of their employer-provided health insurance — in addition to deductibles. Combined, that's thousands of dollars a year.

Why teachers shouldn't likewise help shoulder the cost of their health insurance isn't clear — except that unionized teachers have the right to strike and thus the power to close schools. Forcing kids to stay home, with rare exceptions, gets ill-prepared parents screaming and leads to school boards giving in to whatever the union demands.

This no longer is an acceptable — or affordable — scenario. The cost of health care is exorbitant. Employers are going broke trying to pay for it, which is why coverage is eroding and the cost to workers growing. And so we get less for more.

We understand why teachers don't want to go there. But taxpayers, like employers, aren't a bottomless well. They can only afford so much and they're at the breaking point.

The school board must stand its ground. And taxpayers must stand behind the board.

Bottom line: Neshaminy teachers must start paying for their health insurance, and what they pay should increase each and every year — just like their salaries, which are generous and bolstered by automatic contractual increases in addition to step or longevity raises. Does anybody else get a pay hike just for hanging around?

Making the situation all the more intolerable for taxpayers is the secrecy that shrouds contract talks. Negotiations go on behind closed doors and the only input taxpayers get is a token hour or two of public comment — after the contract's been ratified by teachers and agreed to by school board negotiators. What follows is a rubber-stamp vote by the full board no matter how unhappy taxpayers are with the plan.

Why bother?

And why stay wedded to a process that's a proven failure? Opening the negotiating process to public scrutiny would force the union to temper its demands and school board negotiators to likewise bargain in good faith. Just as important, it would let taxpayers see what they're going to have to pay for — before it's a done deal.