

Teacher contract talks at a standstill

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Neshaminy

The teachers union hasn't revealed its contract offer, but the school board says the union refuses to pay anything toward health care premiums.

After a second meeting following several months of silence, there is still no progress being made in negotiations between the Neshaminy school board and teachers union, officials said.

Both sides met in the middle of last week with a newly appointed state mediator, but "not a whole lot happened," said board President Ritchie Webb.

Louise Boyd, president of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers, concurred that there's "really nothing going on at all." She declined further comment.

In a board statement on the district's Web site, Webb referred to the board's concerns about "unprecedented pressures" on Neshaminy's budget due to the rise in unemployment and what he called the worst economic downturn in 75 years.

That's why the board's position has been an annual 3 percent salary increase, including steps, and a requirement that employees pay 15 percent, 16 percent and 17 percent toward health care premiums over three years. Although the union rejected that offer, the district's administrators in March accepted a deal for themselves that mirrored that contract, officials said.

The board claims the union's proposal remains unchanged, with a request for a total 6 percent annual salary hike, including steps, and a requirement for no change to the medical insurance package, which includes "the most expensive medical prescription drug plan in Southeastern Pennsylvania," said Webb.

Boyd has denied those claims, but she hasn't revealed the union's offer.

The district Web site says the union proposed a Personal Choice PC20 package, a plan that would cost educators \$10 for generic drugs and \$25 for brand name prescriptions, and zero premium contributions. The board offered a Personal Choice PC20/30/70 package, a plan that would cost teachers \$5 for generics and \$30 for brand name drugs, administrators said.

Webb also said the teachers want to expand the retirement incentive, which includes free health care for employees and their spouses until age 65, to a \$30,000 cash payment. The cost difference between the two health care proposals would be \$4 million this year, according to the board.

The board also claims the union's proposal would raise the average salary from under \$80,000 to \$93,000 over three years, a \$16 million difference from the board's offer, said Webb.

While the board says the teachers have requested salary increases and step increases retroactive to the 2008-09 school year, the board in May withdrew that offer. The teachers are working with frozen salaries under a contract that expired in June 2008, but the cost of their benefits to the district continues to rise.

Since 2005, Northwest Area School District educators have been working without a new contract and Lakeland School District teachers haven't had an agreement in more than two years, according to online reports.

No further talks have been scheduled, officials said.

Staff writer Manasee Wagh contributed to this story. Rachel Canelli can be reached at 215-949-4191 or

rcanelli@phillyBurbs.com.

Where other district teacher contracts stand:

Bensalem: contract expires 2011

Bristol Borough: approved deal through Aug. 31, 2012

Bristol Township: approved agreement through Aug. 31, 2013

Centennial: contract expires June 30, 2010; negotiations haven't begun

Council Rock: extended revised deal through 2011-12

Morrisville: contract expires 2012

Pennsbury: extended current agreement through 2009-10 with mostly no salary increases

Sources: local school districts

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