

NESHAMINY

Teachers reject latest contract offer

The new plan required teachers to contribute 15-17 percent to their health care premiums. The board said the union is asking for 6 percent annual raises and zero percent toward insurance contributions.

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No, no and no. During the most recent negotiation session between the Neshaminy school board and the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers last week, the union said no to the district's newest health care offer, officials said. While the educators provided a counter-proposal, they still have no new deal. And no more talks are set, according to the board.

The 700 teachers reportedly rejected the board's latest medical and prescription drug benefits offer that involved a less-restrictive Personal Choice option that doesn't require enrollment with a primary care physician, referrals for specialist care, or drug formulary restrictions, according to a statement from the board faxed to the newspaper and posted to the district's Web site Tuesday morning.

The newer plan also required teachers to contribute 15, 16 and 17 percent to their monthly premiums over three years and proposed a 3 percent annual salary raise, including step increases, officials said.

The educators supposedly responded by asking for 6 percent annual raises, including step increases, and offered zero percent in insurance premium contributions, board members said.

Union President Louise Boyd said in an e-mail to the newspaper that those facts aren't entirely accurate, but she did not elaborate.

"As always, my response is that I will continue to work directly with the board and our members in issues related to negotiations," she said.

Boyd added she didn't want to comment further without seeing the board's statement. The newspaper was unsuccessful in providing her with a copy of that, or reaching her for further comment.

"This is not good," said board President Ritchie Webb, who referred to the teachers' requests as unreasonable, unaffordable and incomparable to other districts.

"The public has a right to know," Webb continued. "We were hopeful this would come out better. But I'm always optimistic and I still believe that we can work this out. We'll meet any time they want. But unless we get some movement, there's no point."

Neither side has strayed from the original salary proposals. The board, though, has upped the health insurance premium percentages requests from their initial, more limited HMO plan, which asked for 10, 11, and 12 percent, officials said.

Although the teachers don't pay anything toward their health care premiums, they do have \$15 co-pays for doctor visits and \$5 and \$20 for generic and brand-name drugs, respectively, through Personal Choice, the district's human resources department reported.

Neshaminy is the only district in Bucks County where employees currently pay nothing toward premiums. Other educators in surrounding districts contribute to their health care: 8 percent in Morrisville, 9 percent in Bensalem and 10 percent in Pennsbury, administrators said.

Neshaminy School District pays at least \$22,000 per year to cover a family of four's health care. The average employer contribution for a similar package is roughly \$12,700, according to the National Coalition on Health Care.

If the Neshaminy educators' latest proposal was accepted, it would mean an additional \$5.4 million to the district next year alone. Neshaminy is facing a \$14 million budget deficit, which could mean an average \$500 tax increase, officials said.

Just as the number of teachers could decrease later this year once ninth grade moves up to the high school, Neshaminy's average teacher salary of \$76,000 could go down as well, administrators said.

"Unfortunately, [the union's] response ... indicates a clear unwillingness to recognize dire financial troubles that the district and taxpayers face during these challenging economic times," the board's statement said. "The district wants and insists on a fair contract for its valued teaching staff ... [but] until this negotiating position changes, there can be no contract agreement."

Meanwhile, the teachers are continuing to show support for each other and the union by wearing blue Federation shirts with white stickers that display the number of days they've been working without a new contract.

"Many members ... are proud of their affiliation," Boyd said in an e-mail to the newspaper late last month. "This is a practice that teachers have been doing for years ... and we will continue to ... show our unity and our resolve to secure a fair contract for our members. It is our policy to communicate directly with our members, as well as the district, and not through the media." Rachel Canelli can be reached at 215-949-4191 or .