

Teachers express solidarity

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Neshaminy

The school board president said unless the teachers are willing to discuss health care, future talks would be "meaningless."

Neshaminy School District's several hundred teachers met outside their respective schools Wednesday morning before walking in together as a sign of solidarity in contract negotiations.

The roughly 700 educators have been working without a new agreement since June 2008. The last bargaining session was held in January, but the union and school board have been at a standstill since summer.

"Our teachers are together during this time," said Louise Boyd, president of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers. "(They) continue to demonstrate their commitment to students and families of Neshaminy every day. I am continually honored to represent such a dedicated and professional group of educators."

Similar to silent picketing at the district's elementary and middle back-to-school nights in the fall, which prompted parent protests, the teachers reportedly plan to continue peacefully marching into their schools every Wednesday morning in the future as well. But Boyd would not confirm that, saying she would discuss union matters only with members.

Board President Ritchie Webb said he understands and respect the teachers' solidarity statement, but it "does nothing to change the financial facts at Neshaminy."

The union's time, Webb added, would be better spent working with the board to settle the contract.

"The board and the community value the services of all our employees but + we simply do not have money," he said. "I have no power to stop the teacher protest and will not interfere as long as their actions do not jeopardize the safety of our students."

No new talks have been scheduled.

School board member Richard Eccles said Tuesday the board has asked labor unions in the cash-strapped district to suggest what programs can be cut to help balance the 2010-11 budget.

They should know, he said, because they're "the professionals." But, Eccles said, rank-and-file members in the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers told him their union leadership never passed on that request.

"I am so frustrated with the situation we have in Neshaminy. I'm an advocate of education. What disturbs me is we compensate people very, very well and for them to not move an inch is very disturbing. It's almost as if we have another class of citizens who feel entitled."

The school board has a list of some 30 areas that could be cut to close the district's \$7.3 million deficit for the next school year, but has yet to act on any of them, Eccles said. The district faces a June 30 deadline for final approval of a budget.

The newspaper was unsuccessful in reaching Boyd, the teachers union president, for comment Wednesday concerning Eccles' remarks.

Webb said the board is willing to meet anytime but the NFT has shown no significant movement on the health care issue.

"Unless NFT leadership is willing to put that issue on the table, any further discussions would be meaningless," he said.

The board has offered an annual 3 percent salary increase, which includes 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 2009 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, which includes steps, and a requirement for no change to the medical insurance package, said Webb. Boyd has denied those claims, but she hasn't revealed the union's offer.

Eccles said he wasn't sure if the teachers union would strike.

"They have that 15 percent (toward healthcare premiums) figured out to the penny when they have to make a move," Eccles said. He said he doesn't know what that point is, if it's been reached, or when it might be reached.

Getting the teachers union and support staff to begin paying 15 percent for medical premiums would likely save the district \$4 million in the coming school year, he said. But Eccles, former president of the board, doesn't see that happening any time soon.

"They are masters at their game," he said of union leaders. "They won't budge."

In December, a state appeals court upheld a labor relations board's refusal to issue a complaint against the district for not adjusting educators' salaries for earned academic credits. And the board already withdrew its offer to make those increases retroactive for the 2008-09 school year, said Webb.

Meanwhile, members of the Neshaminy Educational Support Professional Association, which includes 270 full-time and 282 part-time positions for jobs ranging from bus drivers to janitors to food service workers, have been working under an expired contract since July. That group's negotiations are currently in a fact-finding process.

While school board directors have said Neshaminy can't keep paying for a top tier health insurance plan, support union members have said they can't afford to contribute what the board is asking.

The board is proposing annual wage increases of 1 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the second and third years of a three-year contract with the support staff. Their union, though, wants a five-year deal with no wage increase in the first year - provided there's no employee contribution to health care premiums - and a 3.5 percent wage increase for the middle three years plus a 4 percent increase in the final year of a five-year contract, according to Neshaminy's Web site.

The board is asking the support staff to contribute 10 percent, 11 percent and 12 percent to a changed base medical plan over three years. The support staff union wants to keep the PC-15 plan and pay percentages of 0, 2, 3, 4 and 5 over five years, administrators said.

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