

Contract woes are talk of the district

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NESHAMINY

Residents were offered the chance to ask questions of the district's labor attorney Tuesday night.

A light agenda and a large turnout of teachers, parents and residents put the ongoing negotiations between the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers and the school board on center stage at Tuesday's Neshaminy school board meeting.

The board asked its labor attorney Chuck Sweet - who is involved in the talks with the union - to answer questions from residents concerned with the fact that the two sides have been unable to agree on a new contract for the district's teachers for nearly 27 months.

Cyndie Bowman, a teacher who works in the School District of Philadelphia, asked Sweet if it was possible to seek an emergency injunction against the union's work-to-contract action.

This action calls for teachers to work to the letter of their contract to show how much extra they do that is not required. It has been in effect since the end of last school year and will continue into the new school year.

Bowman said she believes the work-to-contract is a form of a "working strike."

Sweet said he thinks the action could be argued to be a strike, but that Pennsylvania courts would not issue a labor injunction against it.

"I think that the work-to-contract, while an annoyance to some, is not illegal until some court says that it is," Sweet added. "I'm not sure that a Bucks County court will do so this year or at any time during this labor dispute."

In response to a question from board president Ritchie Webb, Sweet said that allowing parents to assist in certain activities not addressed by teachers during the action - such as decorating bulletin boards - is permissible.

Parent Matt Pileggi of Middletown said the division caused by the dispute among the teachers, the board and the taxpayers was troubling.

"It is unfortunate that we've been pitted against each other as enemies instead of putting our minds together," he said.

Most of the residents in attendance applauded after Middletown resident Steve Rodos said that he felt the board "has made a generous offer to the union based on today's economy."

The board is hoping that NFT negotiators present a counteroffer to the district's proposal at tonight's scheduled session of talks.

The school 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.

Teachers in the district have been working without a contract since June 2008 and pay nothing toward their health care premiums.

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