

Volunteers step in to dress up grade school

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neshaminy schools

PTO members helped decorate bulletin boards during a labor dispute.

Volunteers have stepped in to pick up the slack after a union labor dispute with the Neshaminy School District prompted teachers to work to the letter of their contract to show how much extra they usually do.

In the hallways of Lower Southampton Elementary School last week, members of the school's Parent Teacher Organization spent hours decorating 24 bulletin boards outside each classroom.

The task is usually done by the teachers, but bulletin boards have remained bare since the work-to-contract action was put into effect by the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers at the end of the last school year.

"We just thought it was extremely necessary, especially in an elementary school," said PTO President Marlaena Potts. "We wanted the school to look like it always did for the start of classes. It was depressing to see nothing up on the walls."

The organization took action, Potts said, when she heard rumors that hallway bulletin board decorations would be one of the elements affected by the work-to-contract.

"Normally, the PTO just decorates the bulletin board at the front of the school, while the teachers take care of the ones outside the classrooms," Potts said. "We heard there was a chance they were not going to be done, so we decided to do it ourselves."

It's unclear whether the hallway bulletin boards would have been decorated by the teachers before the Lower Southampton Elementary students return to school Tuesday.

Superintendent Louis Muenker said Friday that the district "always appreciates the help and support from the various parent teacher organizations (in all the schools)." He added that it has become "past practice and tradition" for these groups to take part in some bulletin board decoration.

A Courier Times photographer was not permitted to enter Lower Southampton Elementary Friday to take pictures. Muenker said the staff needed to focus on the start of the school year and "would rather that any photos be taken after the first day of school."

Neshaminy teachers have been working without a contract since June 2008. Negotiation sessions continue between the union and the school board, but the work-to-contract action is expected to continue into the start of the new year. Classes begin in all Neshaminy schools Tuesday.

The dispute has caused many residents to take sides with the union or board, but Potts and the PTO tries to remain neutral.

"We love the teachers here," she added. "We know that many of them really enjoy doing the little things, like decorating the bulletin boards, but their union feels the work-to-contract is needed. We like working with the teachers and we really don't want to work against them."

Potts said it had been customary for teachers to throw their students informal end-of-the-year parties, but that practice also was stopped amidst the contract impasse. In lieu of in-school parties, the Lower Southampton Elementary PTO gave each student a Neshaminy water bottle filled with candy at the end of last year.

"We're here to help support everyone in the school, but the kids are our first priority," Potts said. "We've approached (Principal Charles D'Alfonso) and let him know we're ready to do whatever he might need us to do during all of this. We don't want to see our kids miss out on anything."

At last week's school board meeting, board labor attorney Chuck Sweet said it's "permissible" for parents of students throughout the district to help address some of the issues and activities - such as decorating hallways - affected by the work-to-contract decision.

The board has offered teachers an annual 3 percent salary increase, which includes steps, and a requirement that employees pay 15 percent, 16 percent and 17 percent toward healthcare premiums over three years. Teachers pay nothing toward their healthcare premiums.

At the Aug. 25 negotiation session, the NFT delivered a verbal counteroffer that, according to the school board, included concessions in some areas, but not to employee healthcare contributions.

The next negotiation session is scheduled for Sept. 23.

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"Volunteers step in to dress up grade school" Bucks County Courier Times 29 Aug 2010: B1