

Teachers, parents square off

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They came. They spoke. They left.

Several hundred Neshaminy teachers Tuesday night walked into the school board meeting together. After several parents, and even a few bus drivers spoke, two union leaders spoke to thunderous applause and a standing ovation from their membership. And then, even though more residents were signed up to speak and the board still had to attend to its business agenda, the educators left the same way they came: as a group.

Louise Boyd, president of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers, told the board she was looking forward to Thursday's bargaining session. Anne Schmidt, vice president of the union, said the way to come to a resolution is through hard work, creative problem-solving and communication.

"The district hasn't been willing, or has been unable, to do the hard work to get things done," Schmidt said. "It's a shame for the taxpayers."

As the teachers walked out, many parents yelled that the educators were being disrespectful and childish. Middletown resident Steve Rodos, whose son teaches in the district, described the teachers' actions as "less than a class act. Obviously they care about their own input and, unfortunately, take the opinion of no one else."

Outside the meeting, Boyd would say only that she was "consistently impressed with the membership." Back inside the meeting, dozens of parents upset by the teachers doing only what's required by their contract in the classroom, were wearing red shirts that said "proud parent of a Neshaminy student." Feasterville mom Cyndie Bowman said she's appalled and has had enough and both sides should be embarrassed by their behavior.

"Disrupting education with bickering and non-negotiating tactics + is costing time and money," she said. "It's time to end the embarrassment. This is about the kids, who are innocent bystanders to a downward spiraling economy."

Bowman also said she's disappointed in the board, too, whose job is to negotiate. She added that parents want to give teachers everything they deserve, like paying for their health care benefits, but the district has no money. Bowman also encouraged other parents to come to meetings to be proactive and stand up for their children.

Bus driver and Feasterville resident Chuck Torpey, who's been pleading with the board not to outsource busing, said, "If the teachers think they've got the public's support, they need to go back to school. It's time to listen and to give back a little. Students copy teachers' actions and then all chaos breaks out."

While Neshaminy High School students held peaceful protests last week regarding the teachers working to contract, Torpey referred to an unidentified number of Maple Point Middle School students who were reportedly suspended and fined for refusing to go to class.

Stacy Kirsh, who's also a Pennsbury teacher, said parents are spoiled by educators who go above and beyond what's required. She said she's concerned by the lack of talks, especially about things like class size. Kirsh was booed by audience members for walking back up to the podium after she was done speaking and Bowman tried to start her comments.

Other parents, though, said they're disgusted by the teachers' actions, which they called unprofessional and self-centered. They feel like they're caught in the middle, just like students.

"There has to be some way the board and the teachers can come together in agreement for the good of everyone," said Sarah Evans, 13, a seventh-grader at Maple Point. "Sure there needs to be compromise, but in every relationship there's give and take."

Board members Kim Koutsouradis and Mike Morris apologized for the union's actions and said shame on the teachers.

"They're not giving you the respect you deserve," Koutsouradis told residents. "How couldn't they want to stop the bleeding in the community by negotiating a new contract to help so many others who need it?"

Superintendent Lou Muenker said while he's disappointed, puzzled and distressed by the teachers working to contract, he also asked for people to stop yelling and pointing fingers and focus on supporting the children.

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