

Residents urge board to stand firm in contract talks

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Neshaminy

The board also joined several other local districts in approving a motion asking state representatives to support legislation making teacher strikes illegal.

Before the Neshaminy school board approves the final budget in two weeks, residents and parents had one last message for school directors: listen to taxpayers, stand firm in negotiations and don't give in to union demands.

"I'm begging the board to please listen to the taxpayers of Neshaminy," said Denise Mariakis a longtime Langhorne resident whose three sons graduated from the district. "Please do not bend and give in to the teachers union. I pay \$800 a month for my health care. They should contribute something."

Parents, who once again wore red shirts that said, "Proud parent of a Neshaminy student," also donned white stickers with red lettering that read, "I contribute to my health care." Homeowners, who also blamed former boards for the labor dispute issue, pleaded with the board saying they can't afford a tax increase.

The school board unanimously voted to postpone the budget vote until June 29, giving them a few more weeks to negotiate with the support staff before approving outsourcing transportation, food, grounds keeping and custodial services to save more than \$30 million over the next five years.

It's something that's been an emotional topic for the support staff. As tears streamed down his face, James Brigham, a 29-year district bus driver, said he's praying the board doesn't outsource his job or he'll lose his Bristol home.

"Outsourcing's not the answer," he said. "It fixes a small problem that's only going to get worse. You need to look deep and hard at the other options out there."

The teachers, who walked out of the last meeting, weren't present. But Neshaminy High School junior Dylan Atkinson, who organized a peaceful protest at his Middletown school, talked about the educators only doing what's required by their contract.

Dylan said he wasn't for or against the teachers, just supporting his fellow students. But he called the educators' actions a strike and said things like writing letters of recommendation should still be happening because he believes they're legally considered past practices.

"I'm glad negotiations have resumed. But we really need to start getting somewhere with them," Dylan said. "I understand the resolve of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers and I also understand money's tight. But we're tired of being used as a bargaining chip by both the union and the board. We're caught in the middle. I think we've lost sight of why we're all here."

On that note, the board also unanimously approved a last minute agenda addition requested by parents asking local representatives to support the Strike Free Education Act, or House Bill 1369, which would make strikes and retroactive contract payments illegal. State Rep. Frank Farry, R-142, said Tuesday night that he recently signed on as a co-sponsor to support the bill.

Neshaminy joins several other area school districts, including Morrisville, Bensalem and Pennsbury in approving similar resolutions. The state education association opposes the bill because the group believes in teachers' right to strike.

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"Residents urge board to stand firm in contract talks" Bucks County Courier Times 16 Jun 2010: B4