

Officials trade barbs over teachers contract

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Neshaminy

It's the most they've talked in months.

That's what Louise Boyd, president of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers, said of a brief banter between her and the board during Tuesday night's public school board meeting. Board President Ritchie Webb responded that Boyd's attitude was disrespectful and not constructive.

Boyd addressed the board during public comment about the fact that the teachers have been working without a contract since June 2008. The last bargaining session was in January, but the board and union have been at a standstill since last summer.

"At some point, we need to sit down at the table and stop flaming the fire + actually roll up our sleeves and figure out what's going on," Boyd said. "It's very easy to blame educators, bus drivers + (but) there's more than one way to solve multiple problems."

Boyd said the board's approach seems to be, "If we wait long enough, it will fix itself." She said the board sat and watched both the teachers' and support staff's contracts expire.

"It's quite unfortunate + it does force the hand of those employed by you," Boyd said. "We probably shouldn't have been as patient as we have been the last two years."

Webb responded that if Boyd's comments were an invitation to meet, he accepted.

"We're willing to sit down anytime," he said.

Boyd called Webb's response predictable and consistent, saying she hasn't gotten an offer to meet via phone, e-mail, etc. Webb said he hasn't either.

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. 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.

Webb said Boyd's approach Tuesday night wasn't going to solve anything. But, he added, the board would still reach out to set up a meeting with the union, "as we've done in the past."

"I haven't been hiding for the last two years. I'm ready to go. I'm available," Boyd said. "But every conversation ends with 'until we agree to what's on the table, there's no sense in meeting.' It becomes offensive. We'll meet anytime. Let's do it. But we won't negotiate in public or one item at a time. If you're going to do it that way, you're going to have trouble at the table."

Board member William O'Connor said if the district doesn't make significant changes, especially to health care, there will be layoffs and programs cut.

"It's not trickery," he said. "It's simple mathematics of the situation in a worldwide economy gone bad."

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