

Board rejects fact-finder's recommendations

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Neshaminy

One yes plus one no equals no deal.

The Neshaminy support union approved a fact-finder's recommended contract, including agreeing to outsource busing. The school board, however, said no with its silence.

Not responding within 10 days of the report being issued counts as a rejection, according to board President Ritchie Webb. Monday was the deadline to respond.

"The board still has some questions as to whether or not the report meets the financial needs of the district," Webb said. "We're also hopeful that we can have some discussions with the union to look at other options."

Even though they've already technically said no, the board will formally vote on the report during its May 19 meeting to explain its rejection and let the public review the information, said Webb.

The Neshaminy Educational Support Professional Association voted 179-79 to OK the deal, according to the support staff's Web site. Union representatives aren't happy. Union President Mindy Anderson referred questions to Gary Smith, region field director for the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

"We're very disappointed," Smith said. "It was the board's request to go to fact-finding. We weren't happy with all of the things in there. But it's supposed to be an attempt to get somewhere in between the two parties."

Smith explained that the support staff agreed to outsource busing because the fact-finder provided some undisclosed conditions that would ensure jobs were protected.

First Student proposed a \$26.5 million five-year plan. Since the district's costs for the same services would cost \$36.6 million, that would bank \$15.9 million for Neshaminy, district officials said.

Administrators also want to sell Neshaminy's bus fleet to First Student for about \$3.4 million and the fact-finder found the district has a right to that savings, according to Smith. The company would also rent the district's garage and office space at more than \$250,000 a year, officials said.

Under First Student's proposal, more than 90 percent of Neshaminy's existing staff would be retained at their current pay rate, which is about \$21 an hour for bus drivers, administrators said.

The company also would pay between 70 percent and 80 percent toward employees' medical benefits, which would mean the workers would contribute roughly 20 percent to 30 percent. Like Neshaminy's teachers, full-time support staffers don't currently contribute to their health insurance premiums, officials said.

Since First Student also provides transportation for Council Rock and Bristol Township, the company could combine some routes to shared private and parochial school stops, administrators said.

Smith said union representatives met with the bus drivers before the vote to explain the recommendations, but conceded that the 79 no votes were most likely from the drivers.

Support union members include 270 full-time and 282 part-time jobs ranging from bus drivers to janitors to food service workers. They've been working under an expired contract since July.

While school board directors have said Neshaminy can't keep paying for a top tier health insurance plan, support union members have said they can't afford to contribute what the board is asking.

The board is proposing annual wage increases of 1 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the second and third years of a three-year contract with the support staff. Their union wants a five-year deal with no wage increase in the first year - provided there's no employee contribution to health care premiums - and a 3.5 percent wage increase for the middle three years, plus a 4 percent increase in the final year of a five-year contract, according to Neshaminy's Web site.

The board is asking the support staff to contribute 10 percent, 11 percent and 12 percent to a changed base medical plan over three years. The support staff union wants to keep the PC-15 plan and pay percentages of 0, 2, 3, 4 and 5 over five years, administrators said.

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