

Students stage protest again

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Neshaminy

Following the second day of peaceful protests by students, a school board official announced the board and teachers union will meet June 3 for the first time since January.

Hey, we're still here.

That was the message of more than 200 Neshaminy High School students Thursday morning as they peacefully protested the lack of negotiations between the school board and teachers union by standing outside their Middletown school before classes started.

Students at Maple Point Middle School who staged a similar demonstration were not as quiet and refused to go back into their building for about an hour. The children did not initially listen to administrators' directives. Some students even missed scheduled class trips. Middletown police and in some cases parents had to be called. It's unclear how many students were involved in the incident or what disciplinary action, if any, they will face, according to Superintendent Lou Muenker.

Several pupils who organized the high school event said it was to show their neutrality and solidarity in the situation, not to take sides. Holding signs that read "What about us," and "Who really suffers," the teens said they just wanted to represent and support themselves and ask both parties to sit down and keep talking.

And, apparently, they will be. Neshaminy school Board President Ritchie Webb confirmed a meeting is scheduled June 3 with the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers.

"We're not against the teachers," said Susie Mayer, 17. "We just don't think we should be caught in the middle."

Part of what sparked the students' action was the teachers doing only what's required by their contract and nothing extra, including writing recommendations and attending events such as graduation. The teachers have been working without a contract since June 2008. Their last negotiation meeting was in January, but the two sides have been at a standstill since last summer.

Louise Boyd, president of the teachers union, said the educators applaud the students for what she described as a "responsible act and a clear testament as to their concern about the state of contract negotiations - or should I say lack of negotiations at Neshaminy."

"We hope it has a positive effect in getting the district to finally meet with us for substantive talks, something they've been unwilling to do ever since they took their, 'It's our way or the highway' stance on negotiations more than two years ago," she said. "That's not negotiating; that's bullying. And we won't be bullied."

Webb responded that if the teachers were equally serious about meeting, they wouldn't have waited until this week to set a date.

"Also, I have repeatedly stated openly that the board will meet anytime, however health care cost must be a consideration," he said. "I am mystified why (Boyd) would even make such a comment about bullying, especially now that we have just set up a meeting next week."

Webb added that he was proud of the students for making their point and showing maturity and respect.

"What a better way to express their concerns + great example for us all to follow," he said.

Board members have repeatedly said they're willing to meet anytime, but health care costs must be considered. They claim the teachers have not offered to contribute to their medical insurance package premiums.

Thursday's protests follow a similar demonstration Wednesday by juniors and seniors standing in the hallways after third period and refusing to go to their next class. The event, which witnesses estimated involved

hundreds of juniors and seniors, lasted several minutes before administrators ushered the pupils back into their classrooms, administrators said.

"We really do like our teachers," said Louis Sacks, a junior. "We just don't have any say in what's going on."

To maintain a sense of safety and order, Middletown police were on hand, just in case, said Principal Rob McGee. But Muenker said the kids had a right to express themselves.

After all, 16-year-old Dylan Atkinson said, they're affected just as much as everybody else.

"We are a part of this community," said Atkinson, the junior class president. "The board represents the administration. The union represents the teachers. Who represents the students? We're just hoping that if they see the impact it's having, they resolve this sooner."

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, according to administrators. Louise Boyd, president of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers, has denied those claims but hasn't revealed the union's offer.

The board is also considering outsourcing some support staff jobs and cutting various programs and positions from a list of 15 items to attempt to close a \$5.6 million budget gap, officials said.

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