

Neshaminy parents left scrambling

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Most elementary schools will be open to provide day care.

By Chris English

Staff Writer

Irene Foster of Hulmeville was taking advantage of the unseasonably warm weather on Saturday to take down the family's Christmas decorations.

Despite the beautiful day, her mood wasn't all sunny. Some of her thoughts were on the Neshaminy School District teachers strike that will start on Monday. Foster and her husband Jeffrey have two sons in the district, one in the sixth grade and the other in fourth.

"It's greedy," said Irene Foster of the strike. "They are being selfish. My husband is a contractor and we've always paid into our health insurance."

Neshaminy teachers are working under a contract that expired in 2008. While they have not received any pay raises since the deal expired, they continue to contribute nothing toward their health insurance premiums. Their latest proposal includes an offer to pay a small percentage of their health insurance premiums, but nothing close to what most private sector workers contribute.

"The kids were just off for the holiday vacation, they went back for a week, and now they will be home again," Foster continued. "We're fortunate because I'm a stay-at-home mother, but many other people aren't that lucky. The kids think it's great because they think they'll be sitting around playing Xbox all day, but I've tried to explain to them how this will affect a lot of people in a bad way."

Another Hulmeville resident, borough councilman Frank Lewis, was equally disgusted by the strike. He and wife Carolyn have a son who's a junior at Neshaminy High School and a daughter who attends third grade at Herbert Hoover Elementary.

"It's an outrage," said Frank Lewis. "After all this time, it's ridiculous to go out on strike, and what are they going to get out of it? They'll go out for two weeks or whatever it's going to be and it's not going to change anything. The taxpayers can't afford what they want. You can't get blood out of a stone."

Lewis said he and his wife both work full time, so his son will have to take care of his daughter during the strike.

"I was a member of the Teamsters union for 30 years, and one of our rules of thumb is you don't strike a company that's in the red, that is having financial problems," he continued. "But this teachers union doesn't seem to realize that. It's like the blind leading the blind."

Middletown resident Jim Bayer, who has three children attending Neshaminy schools, was less angry with the teachers and more hopeful the strike might result in a new contract.

"I see problems on both sides, both with the teachers and the school board," he said. "Maybe a strike is a good way to get this whole problem to come to a head. How many years has it been? They can't keep sitting on their heels forever."

Bayer and wife Sheila have a son who is a junior at the high school, a sixth-grade son and a third-grade daughter. Since he and his wife both work full time, Bayer said the oldest son can watch his two younger siblings during the strike.

Most of the district's elementary schools will be staffed with members of the Neshaminy Kids Club to provide day care service for students. Only Albert Schweitzer Elementary and Walter Miller Elementary will be closed. Students in need of day care that usually attend Schweitzer should report to Pearl S. Buck Elementary. Students from Miller that need day care should report to Samuel Everitt Elementary.

Details on the various fees for the service are available on the district website, neshaminy.k12.pa.us.

Middletown resident Trish Ireland has two children attending Carl Sandburg Middle School, a daughter in eighth grade and a son in seventh grade. Both are involved in sports there, and Ireland said she is worried about how the strike will affect sports and other extracurricular activities.

"Day care is not an issue with us, it's the sports," she said. "I also worry about how this interruption will affect the kids' work and education. My son was saying he just got back to school after the Christmas break and now this. The teachers are hurting the students with this strike. It's ridiculous. Everyone is hurting in these economic times. It's life, and the teachers have to accept that."

Ireland said her whole family is planning a cruise starting April 2 during spring break. Now, she wonders whether classes will be scheduled during the break to make up for time lost during the strike.

"I don't care, we're still going," she said. "If the teachers can stay out of school, then the kids can too."

"It's ridiculous them going out on strike in this time of economic distress," added Gina Currington, who has a seventh-grader in the district. She doesn't know who will look after him during the strike.

Middletown resident Raymond Heitz said he had three children and five nephews come through the Neshaminy School District. None are still in school, and Heitz said he can see both sides of the issue but in the end comes down on the side of taxpayers.

"My sister (Jeannette Hesser) was a Neshaminy teacher who retired a couple of years ago," said Heitz. "She was tremendously dedicated. She used to stay up to 10 or 11 many nights grading papers. If you divided her salary by the number of hours she worked, I bet it would come out to about \$10 an hour. Are all the teachers that dedicated? I don't know. I'm sure some are."

"But sooner or later the teachers have to realize they're going to have to settle for something less than what they want," Heitz continued. "The taxpayers just can't afford it in this time when so many people are losing jobs, or taking pay freezes or cuts, and homes are losing their value. The teachers have to come into the new reality. The union has to grow up."

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