

Ritchie Webb, school board president

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After four years of fruitless contract negotiations, the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers (NFT) has chosen to escalate our impasse by enacting a strike effective Monday, Jan. 9. Make no mistake about it - this job action is aimed directly at the students and the parents of Neshaminy in hopes that you will panic, and in turn pressure your school board into making contractual concessions this district cannot afford.

The question on the minds of so many residents is how did we get here? It all stems from a collective bargaining agreement signed 10 years ago that gave our teachers an unprecedentedly expensive and powerful control over the district. The contract was unaffordable from the very start, and it required past school boards to take money from district reserve accounts and raise taxes above inflationary rates in order to pay for it. With our reserve balances dwindling down to irresponsibly low levels, and with taxing authority now limited by the State's Act 1 legislation, your Neshaminy School Board needed to take control of an out-of-control situation. If we did not do so, the only remaining method to subsidizing the teachers' contract was to begin slashing student programs. We did not consider this an option, so our only remaining course of action was clear.



But economics isn't the only reason change is needed as there are other elements of this contract that are in dire need of reform. Our teachers were given "equal say" with administration, which gave them veto power over virtually any initiative that building administrators wanted to implement. In essence, this district's principals were rendered powerless against the whims of union leaders. The effect of this has been devastating to Neshaminy's educational status.

Since the 2002 contract went into effect, Neshaminy's PSSA aggregated rank in the four key categories (Math, Reading, Writing, Science) plummeted from 153rd to 245th when compared to the other 500 Pennsylvania districts. As your building principals sought to make changes within their own buildings aimed at improving the educational atmosphere, time and time again they were stymied by NFT leaders who were more concerned with union business than they were with the academic achievement of our students.

The NFT will tell you that equal say is all about respect for teachers, but it isn't. It's about power. It's about control. Can you imagine going up to your employer and telling them that the directive they just issued will not be implemented because you don't agree with it, and that they are powerless to enact it without your blessings. What would happen to you or to any other employee in the private sector if you committed such a blatant act of insubordination? But that's not what happens on Planet Neshaminy where complacency and the status quo are empowered to halt the wheels of innovation and progress.

The NFT wants to hold onto the expense and power of this contract even though you - our taxpayers - cannot afford it. They pulled a play out of their outdated playbook by going into negotiations asking for the moon, then making a few concessions along the way hoping the school board would feel pressured into meeting in the middle. But there is no such middle ground in this case because meeting the NFT halfway with their demands will still require tax increases, spending our district reserve funds, and reduction of student programs. In fact, recently NFT leaders suggested that we could help subsidize the expense of their contract demands by diverting funds that have been earmarked for badly needed building repairs, and also use money put aside by the district to offset the looming teachers' PSERS pension crisis that will hit our taxpayers in their wallets. Do these seem like reasonable alternatives to you?

Undoubtedly you are just as frustrated as we are at the unrealistic demands of our teachers, and that frustration has grown into anger now that they've targeted a strike at you and your children. But the worst thing you can do is sit back and do nothing. You can help your school board restore fiscal sanity and academic

excellence in Neshaminy by standing with us. It's time to tell our teachers that while we respect what they do in the classroom, we cannot risk bankrupting our district to pay for their outrageous contract.

If you have had enough with the fiscal irresponsibility that endangers our students' educational programs, then I ask everyone to call NFT headquarters at 215-547-2001, and demand that our teachers return to the classroom immediately, and also return to the bargaining table committed to negotiating an affordable contract.

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