

## Board meeting mobbed

11 Jan 2012 — Bucks County Courier Times

Hundreds turned out for the school board meeting Tuesday night.

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

On Day 2 of the Neshaminy teachers strike, Maple Point Middle School played host to hundreds of residents and teachers frustrated with the bitter, nearly 4-year-long contract dispute.

Superintendent Louis Muenker announced at the outset that unofficial word from the state Department of Education indicates that the current work stoppage must come to an end by Jan. 19, with schools reopening Jan. 20.

There must be 180 student days completed in the year so teachers must return to work in order to make up the days lost during the strike so that the school year can end on the scheduled date of June 14. However a second strike could be called in the spring, which would push the final day of classes further into June.

Tuesday's meeting held many similarities to a hotly contested sporting event. Most of the crowd in the packed auditorium wore clothing to represent their side - with some residents who supported the school board in red while the teachers wore their navy NFT apparel.

Applause, screams, shouts and sometimes boos created occasional waves of sound that filled the room.

"Teach our kids!" chants began from a large group of residents as the 7 p.m. start time grew closer. Teachers countered in unison shouting "negotiate!" in a determined rhythm.

The school board has suspended contract talks with teachers while the strike was ongoing. The board announced Tuesday that it was cutting off active health care benefits received by teachers during the work stoppage.

Before the meeting, union members lined the path leading to the building with signs pleading with the board to restart negotiations.

Some residents stood among the teachers with signs supporting the school board.

With the building filled to its 775-person capacity, several dozen residents were kept from entering by order of the fire marshal. Four Middletown police officers were posted in and around the building to make sure order was maintained.

The actual business of the meeting was completed in a matter of minutes. The public comment portions dominated the evening.

While health care contributions and salary levels remain large hurdles to overcome in reaching a settlement, the teachers' desire to maintain an equal voice with district administrators was one focus of Tuesday's comments.

The board wants to see ultimate responsibility of educational decisions placed in the hands of administrators, citing falling PSSA scores since teachers were granted equal say years ago.

NFT President Louise Boyd approached the podium to perhaps the loudest mix of cheers and jeers of the night and addressed the issue of the teacher's professional voice within the district.

Equal collaboration between teachers and administrators provides a much-needed checks and balance system, Boyd said. The board would prefer to treat teachers as "pawns rather than partner," she said.

"In (school board President Ritchie) Webb's view, it's all about control, not collaboration," she said. Boyd added that teachers' years of experience with policies and practices through equal say in various committees is a valuable asset to students.

Resident Steve Pirritano said that nearly every other school district in the state is set up with administrators in charge of educational policies.

While a number of residents had harsh words for teachers - some accusing them of using students as bargaining chips by going on strike - board member Kim Koutsouradis pleaded for the venom to stop.

"I will always defend our teachers but I will never defend the strike," he said. "It hurts the kids, but let's keep the venom out. That doesn't do anyone any good."

Neshaminy High School student Zach Heinemann defended his teachers at the podium on a personal level. He said they have helped to shape him as a person. Heinemann and several other students brought coffee to striking teachers on the picket line Monday.

Kevin Gallagher of Middletown said that while a teachers strike might be legal, "it is amoral."

"If teachers say they don't want to strike, then don't strike. The responsibility falls directly at the feet of the union," he said.

Teachers have said that after nearly four years of contract talks they believe the board was stonewalling negotiations with a "take-it-or-leave-it approach."

The board has said it "simply cannot afford" the teachers' demands.

"The thing that gets me is no one wants to take responsibility (for the state of the impasse)," said teacher Cara DeLorenzo. "Everyone wants to point fingers. We've all been pointing fingers for four years. The only way to do this is to come together and talk until its done."

NFT officials said once again Tuesday that they will show up to Thursday's scheduled negotiation session even though the board has decided to suspend talks.

As the meeting adjourned, Webb said if the teachers decide to return to work that he would be at that session as well.

*"Board meeting mobbed" Bucks County Courier Times 11 Jan 2012: A1*