

Parents seek day care options

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With teachers on strike, many moms and dads are put in a tight spot.

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

When the Neshaminy teachers strike began Monday, parents were forced to scramble to find appropriate and affordable day care options.

While six of the eight elementary schools in the district are offering child care during the day, some parents have turned elsewhere for alternative - and cheaper - avenues.

Rachel Dougherty of Middletown said that as soon as she heard about the strike announcement last week, she immediately called the day care service she uses for her daughter in half-day kindergarten.

"Little People Daycare said they could take her for the full day," she said. "Luckily my parents agreed to watch my son in fourth grade. The district service was just too expensive."

Dougherty said she feels helpless and frustrated with the contract dispute.

"I just think the teachers should be in school," she added. "It's a time when things are hard for everybody and we all have to make sacrifices. My son has no worries in the world and just looks at this as a free vacation. My daughter, on the other hand, is a worrywart and asks every day if they're still striking - even though she has no idea what a strike is."

The Neshaminy Kids Club, which can be reached by calling 215-757-2554, partnered with district aides to staff the elementary schools to provide child care during the work stoppage, which is expected to last through Jan. 19. Fees for the service are \$25 a day, some parents said.

According to Superintendent Louis Muenker, registration for district day care has increased each day of the strike.

"On day one, we had 146 students; day two, we had 154 and on day three, it increased to 160," he said Wednesday. "Normally we have about 180 students per day signed up for before-school or after-school care. My informal premise is that there are a number of older siblings taking the role of caring for younger students at home."

Muenker announced at Tuesday's board meeting that child care would only be available at Lower Southampton Elementary and Herbert Hoover Elementary on Monday, which is Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday.

Middletown resident Brian Weiner found day care for his first-grader for only \$10 per day.

"We got lucky," he said. "The lady who takes care of our twin girls, who aren't school-age, agreed to watch our other daughter. The strike just came at the worst time. Students were just coming back from winter break and then they had to be pulled out again when they were finally getting back into the groove. Our children should not be fixtures for debate or used in this way."

Some local businesses are getting creative to help out in this trying time for the community.

The Barnes & Noble bookstore near the Oxford Valley Mall in Falls is offering a free service beginning Wednesday called "Keep Your Kids Thinking."

The two-hour Monday-Wednesday-Friday program is designed specifically to keep students mentally sharp during the work stoppage.

"We have some retired teachers from different districts as well as substitutes working here," said Barnes & Noble employee Bari Jo Davis, who is organizing this effort. "It will run each day from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. and we will try to accommodate as many children as we can."

Davis added that details on the program will be added soon to www.BN.com. Parents should click the "stores and events" link and then find the Oxford Valley location.

Parents or guardians will be required to stay inside the bookstore building during the lessons, she said.

"They could sit in the cafe and drink some coffee or read a book until the session is over," Davis added.

Action Karate in Lower Southampton is offering a day camp for kids ages 5 and up beginning Monday from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

For about \$40 per day, students will learn a variety of techniques and disciplines geared to get them ready for school again. Parents can register by calling 215-355-5003.

Fifty percent of the proceeds will be donated to the parent-teacher organization of whatever school the children usually attend, said head instructor Solomon Brenner.

"We'll teach anti-bullying techniques, concentration and focus," he added. "We emphasize focusing with the mind, the eyes and the mind. We want to promote life skills through martial arts. Once we go through some physical techniques, we talk about how some of those disciplines can be used in the classroom. We'll be watching movies and play games based on lessons. Even when we play dodge ball, we discuss how to handle winning and losing and adversity."

Action Karate has a sign posted outside the studio in support of district teachers, but Brenner said the business is neutral in terms of the dispute.

"We support education in general," Brenner said. "We have a lot of teachers' families that come in so we support them individually, of course. But we don't get into the particulars (of the impasse). We just want to support the community as a whole. It's clear that parents are fed up with the way things are going."

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