

Board suspends talks while teachers gather

13 Jan 2012 — Bucks County Courier Times

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

The Neshaminy Federation of Teachers negotiating team along with hundreds of striking district educators showed up to Maple Point Middle School Thursday for a scheduled round of contract talks.

But, as expected, the board made good on its promise to not negotiate during a teachers strike and did not join them.

Board President Ritchie Webb reiterated this stance during Tuesday's public meeting, adding that if teachers chose to return to work before the negotiation session he would be there ready to talk.

The decision to suspend talks was applauded by many community members at Tuesday's meeting; but the union said it is just another example of the board's "take it or leave it" approach to contract discussions.

According to the board Tuesday, early indications from the state Department of Education stated that in order to complete the required 180 student days for this school year, the union would have to end its strike and get back to class by Jan. 20.

But Webb confirmed Thursday that the strike could legally extend through Feb. 1 which would allow for the 180 days of instruction but push the last day of school back from June 14 to June 30.

If the union returned to work by Jan. 20, there would remain the possibility of another strike this school year, Webb said. He added that if they stay out until February, though, the NFT could not call for another work stoppage until next school year in the fall.

NFT President Louise Boyd Thursday said she was only aware of the Jan. 20 date for a return to work.

Teachers lined the curb outside of the school and chanted "make the choice to hear our voice!"

Many held signs that criticized the board's refusal to negotiate during the strike. "Report card for the Board - attendance: failing; negotiating: failing," read one homemade sign.

"As you can see, (the board's negotiators) are not here," Boyd added from out front of the middle school's entrance at the previously scheduled 6 p.m. start-time for the talks. "This comes as no surprise to us as we learned yesterday from their attorney that despite the urging from the state mediator, they were refusing to meet with us. This is a sad and disturbing development."

Boyd added that if the nearly 4-year-long impasse is to come to an end, the board must agree to meet face-to-face, around the clock, to hammer out a deal.

The two sides have met nearly 40 times with little progress.

"Tonight we challenge the district to get back to the table and go over every point in our contract so that together we can resolve this impasse," Boyd said.

Webb issued a statement Thursday evening regarding the teachers' gathering at the middle school.



"I would be more impressed if the teachers showed up to their classrooms (Thursday) morning instead of at Maple Point (Thursday) evening. Because we would have negotiated if they went back to work and our children would be in school getting their education," he said.

Health care benefits, salary levels, retroactive pay and the teachers' role in determining educational policies continue to separate the two sides.

Another round of talks remains scheduled for Jan. 26.

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