

Strike could end Tuesday

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If teachers formally request binding arbitration, they would have to return to work while the board considers it.

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

The Neshaminy teachers' strike could be over Tuesday.

But, then again, maybe not.

The Neshaminy Federation of Teachers on Friday offered to end the strike, negotiate around the clock for seven days, and if still not successful, head to binding arbitration to settle a nearly four-year contract dispute.



School board President Ritchie Webb viewed the offer as an official request for binding arbitration, which would require teachers to call off their strike while the board decides whether to take them up on the offer.

But union President Louise Boyd said the letter to Webb was not an official request - and was simply a response to a comment made by board member Kim Koutsouradis offering to have the board's negotiation team meet around the clock with the union if the strike was suspended.

The strike started Monday, and the board has since refused to negotiate.

Webb said that state Act 88 - which regulates collective bargaining for school employees - states that upon such a request to enter arbitration, the district would have up to 10 days to consider.

Furthermore, the law mandates that teachers are not permitted to strike during that time.

"The district assumes that the staff will return to work starting Tuesday (after Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday) for a normal day of work and will continue working pending the district's consideration of your request," Webb said Friday in a response letter to Boyd.

Union officials say if the offer had been official, they would have notified the state Bureau of Mediation, as mandated by Act 88, that they were requesting binding arbitration.

"The federation did not issue a written request for arbitration to either the Bureau of Mediation or the board," and NFT spokesperson said in an email to the newspaper. "That fact alone invalidates any claim that this was a request of the sort that would trigger the strike prohibitions. Moreover, we did not even make a formal request to the district. We simply communicated a conditional offer."

However, school board attorney Charles Sweet on Friday said that just because the union failed to notify the Bureau of Mediation, the letter to Webb should still be considered an official request - and that the strike should be immediately suspended.

Webb said that he will need to meet with the other board negotiators to decide the next move, but added that, personally, he is wary of agreeing to arbitration.

"In my view, arbitration generally does not work out well for school districts," he said. "They usually tend to support unions. Residents elected the school board members to represent them. An arbitrator would likely come from Harrisburg and would be unknown to the community. I just feel that keeping it local and allowing us to make the proper decisions would be the way to go. But, ultimately, I must discuss all this with the rest of the board."

Regardless of the latest developments, the NFT, according to state law, must return to classes by Friday in order to complete the state-required 180 days of student instruction and have the option to strike again in the spring. But Webb confirmed Thursday that the strike could legally extend through Feb. 1, which would push the last day of school back from June 14 to June 30, and prevent a second teachers' strike this school year.

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