

Parents gather to back school board

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By Manasee Wagh

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While teacher union representatives rallied in Core Creek Park, dozens of parents and taxpayers gathered on the grounds of a Neshaminy School District school to protest the ongoing strike Monday.

Stamping their feet against the cold, parents, children and district residents joined school board members and legislators for a rally at Lower Southampton Elementary School.

Speakers took turns at an impromptu dais, decrying the disruption to the school year and encouraging the assembled group to have faith that the school board will facilitate a contract that's fair to teachers and taxpayers.



In between speakers, a sound system blasted get-up-and-go songs, and people waved homemade signs in support of the school board.

Board member Mark Shubin said a child's education is the most important goal a society can work toward, and that the next generation's future depends on the educational experiences of today.

"I see a group that has forgotten that credo," said Shubin, referring to the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers. He said he was speaking at the rally on behalf of his 6-year-old child and all the children who have been forced to stay home from school for the past week.

Lower Southampton resident Dorothy Jagers said people can't pad the salaries and benefits of Neshaminy educators anymore. Her real estate taxes in the district have quadrupled from about 30 years ago, reaching nearly \$4,000, she said.

"We can't afford to pay more taxes than we're paying now. Look, we've got good teachers, and I'm sure the younger ones would take a reasonable contract immediately, but what the union's asking for is too much," said Jagers.

Board member Irene Boyle told the crowd that they don't have to worry about the board's position on the contract.

"We intend to hold fast," she said, eliciting a burst of applause.

She said the board is sticking to its contract goals, including no retroactive salary payments and a 15 percent contribution for monthly health premiums. Since the contract expired in 2008, educators' salaries and step levels have been frozen, but they have continued to receive free health care.

Several people held up signs with the words, "We love our school board," and one little girl standing near the dais held up a sign stating "Teachers should be in school."

Another girl, Samantha McKenney, 12, was at the rally with family and friends to support a return to school. She attends Poquessing Middle School in Lower Southampton.

"I went to a school board meeting, and they were yelling and screaming, so I'm kind of upset. I'd just like to see the teachers come back and be in school," she said.

The more than three-year battle over the contract has often erupted in emotional arguments at board meetings.

State Rep. Frank Farry, R-142, a Neshaminy High School graduate, told people to spread the word about what's happening in the district, and to reach out to legislators about supporting House Bill 1369. If passed, the Strike-Free Education Pact would make strikes and lockouts illegal in Pennsylvania public schools. Neshaminy High School hosted a House Education Committee hearing on the legislation in late August.

"No one will move this bill in Harrisburg, because the teachers union is a powerful force, and representatives from other parts of the state feel this is a very localized issue. But we'll continue advocating," said Farry.

Farry asked parents and other district residents to join a trip he is organizing to Harrisburg, where a press conference would help bring the issues surrounding teachers contract negotiations to the fore, he said. Details and a date for the trip are still being put together.

Sen. Tommy Tomlinson, R-6, also talked to the crowd about the importance of getting teachers and students back in school.

Larry Pastor, a resident of the district who has spoken passionately against salary and benefit increases for teachers, said teachers in Neshaminy are already lucky to have great salaries, free health care and a great retirement package.

He is a member of Taxpayers for a Fair Neshaminy School District Budget, which has publicized Neshaminy teachers' earnings and current contract details.

"This isn't about fighting the union. It's about saving the school district," he told the crowd.

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