

Teachers return to school Friday

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An arbitration panel will assist in contract talks, although another strike could be called in the spring.

By Christian Menno

Staff writer

After nearly two weeks of striking, Neshaminy teachers have informed the school district that they will return to class Friday morning.

The move leaves open the possibility of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers calling for a second work stoppage later this school year.

Teachers could have extended the current strike through Feb. 1, but doing so would have made it impossible for students to complete the 180 days of instruction as required by state law.

Superintendent Louis Muenker on Tuesday said that the district's website, www.neshaminy.org, will be updated with this information, and parents will be notified through the auto-call system.

School board President Ritchie Webb added that, with teachers now set to return to work, the negotiation session scheduled for Jan. 26 will likely take place. The board had suspended contract talks with teachers during the strike.

"Obviously I'm very happy that the strike is coming to an end," Webb said. "It will be nice to see my own grandchildren get back to school."

The newspaper was unsuccessful in reaching NFT officials for comment Tuesday.

When the strike is officially completed as expected Thursday, the state Bureau of Mediation will step in and provide an arbitration panel to assist in the talks as required by law, school officials said.

The NFT and the school board will each select an arbitrator to sit on the three-person panel; the third is agreed upon by attorneys from each side, according to Webb.

The arbitration process would be non-binding and any recommendation for a settlement would have to be agreed to by both sides in order for the impasse to be resolved.

"They are assigned to help draw closure and would likely serve in a mediator role, fact finding, looking at proposals from both parties and glean information from the district's financial situation," Muenker added.

During this process, teachers are prohibited from striking. Muenker said that there is no official timetable but expects it to be completed by the spring - when teachers are rumored to possibly strike again.

If completion of the school year is threatened, Webb said an injunction would be filed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to force teachers to return to class.

Some say teachers would be open to that as it could bring a judge into the process.

"A judge's role could vary," Webb said. "It could be as simple as ordering the teachers back to work to forcing regular contract talks. I would hope to get this solved before a second strike. Teachers need to understand that you can strike until the cows come home but it doesn't create more money in the district. We have limited resources."

If a second strike were to end in time for the 180 days to be completed, the negotiations would continue as they have for the last three-plus years with input from a state-appointed mediator, Webb said.

A school board meeting is scheduled for Tuesday. Webb said the location is being changed from the Maple Point Middle School auditorium to the school's gymnasium to accommodate the public. Several residents were restricted from entering last week's meeting because the auditorium was filled to capacity.

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