

## Neshaminy residents, parents voice anger

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The public spoke out against the recent teachers strike.

By Manasee Wagh

Staff writer

Applause competed with boos during the Neshaminy school board meeting Tuesday night, which was packed to overflowing in the bleachers of Maple Point Middle School's gym.

Dozens of people got up to voice their frustration over the ongoing impasse in finding a resolution to the contentious teachers contract.

Some residents who stepped forward during more than an hour of public comment said that the fight for a teachers contract has become volatile and destructive. Parents denounced the recent eight-day teacher strike.

Michele Fay of Langhorne, whose children attend Neshaminy schools, said her kids have been hurt by the strike.

"The teachers say they are not hurting our children. ... I beg to differ. ... I blame all the teachers in our district. They stand in solidarity, they are all accountable," she said.

Several teachers talked about their passion for their work and said the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers has been trying to negotiate a fair deal for the past four years.

Susan Schneider, a teacher in the district for 19 years, said the board engages in union bashing.

"You have taken every chance to demean the teachers here and the teachers union. We have presented a number of ways to overcome this impasse, but time and again you have refused," she said.

Gail Dittes, a resident, said both sides should work together to come to a fair contract, but without the constant taxpayer scrutiny that results in hurtful or inaccurate comments.

"Allowing everyone and his brother to weigh in on these as of yet unresolved details is damaging to the negotiation process. It causes people to take sides and is hurtful to our community," she said.

The crowd roared in response, some people booing and others cheering and stamping their feet.

The Neshaminy Federation of Teachers is scheduled to meet for contract talks with the school board Thursday.

The two sides also need to address the process of nonbinding arbitration, which is required by state law after a strike.

The teachers hit the picket line Jan. 9 and have been working under a contract that expired in 2008. The two sides are struggling to come to terms on issues such as retroactive pay and contributions toward health care premiums.

Look at what teachers in the surrounding districts have, said school board President Ritchie Webb.

"All we are trying to do is just bring you into the norm," he said to the teachers in the room.

Also during the meeting, Superintendent Louis Muenker announced his retirement at the end of his contract, June 30. He thanked the board, the teachers, the community and other administrators for their support during his more than 21 years with the district.

The board approved Muenker's resignation and will look for new candidates for superintendent.

With a \$12 million deficit in the 2012-13 school year, Neshaminy will have to work hard to balance the budget, Muenker said.

"I'm low on rabbits to be pulled from our hats. It's my firm belief that we must get smaller to survive," he said.

The board approved a \$168 million preliminary budget for next year that would require a 15.5-mill tax increase to overcome the shortfall, well above the Act 1 limit to a 1.7 percent tax increase.

That increase equals a \$428 tax hike for the homeowner with the average assessment of \$27,587. The current average tax bill is \$4,193.

"The preliminary budget is the best guess at this point. We're not locked into anything," said Webb. "The goal is still to have a zero tax increase, he said.

"But I'd like to make a motion that we not use exceptions unless absolutely necessary," he said.

The board approved that motion unanimously, though the district will be applying for exceptions to cover special education and retirement contributions.

The board also made a passing score on the 11th-grade PSSA standardized exams a graduation requirement.

Board members said that while educational alternatives will be available for students who don't pass the PSSA, most students should demonstrate that they have the basic graduation skills tested on the exams.

The decision has the support of the administration and the district education committee, said Webb.

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