

Attorneys will meet to discuss next step in Neshaminy contract talks

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By Manasee Wagh

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The Neshaminy teacher contract talks scheduled for Thursday evening have been deferred so attorneys on both sides can meet first to consider the initial steps in a new phase of negotiations - nonbinding arbitration.

The arbitration is mandated by state law after a teacher strike, which Neshaminy teachers did for eight school days beginning Jan. 8 and ending Jan. 19. Both sides now have to decide on an arbitrator or a panel of three arbitrators, according to Act 88.

The meeting of the lawyers to discuss the first steps of arbitration was suggested by the mediator who has been involved in the talks between the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers and the school board.

The attorneys have agreed to meet. A date hasn't been set, but union and school board representatives anticipate the meeting will be soon at an undisclosed date, time location to prevent the possibility of observation by anyone, including members of the board or NFT negotiation teams, said Charles Sweet, labor negotiation attorney for the board.

"Both sides will have questions about the procedure and the timing and the number of people that will be involved (in nonbinding arbitration)," said Sweet.

The negotiation teams will resume meeting after the attorneys and the mediator determine how to proceed. Part of the arbitration process requires that both sides agree on a method for examining each others offers.

Teachers have been working under a contract that expired in 2008. The two sides are struggling to come to terms on issues that include retroactive pay and contributions toward health care premiums. The teachers currently don't contribute anything to their premiums.

"We look forward to any process that will bring us to the bargaining table and ultimately to a contract that's fair and equitable to all stakeholders," said Bob Schiers, an NFT representative.

Schiers and board President Ritchie Webb both said they'd await instructions from their attorneys after the meeting. It's hard to say how long the entire process will take, Webb said.

"You have a lot of people involved and it's hard to get everybody together. It could take several months," he said.

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