

Callers listen in on teachers town hall

26 Jan 2012 — Bucks County Courier Times

By GEMA MARIA DUARTE

Staff writer

Neshaminy teachers union President Louise Boyd used Wednesday night's phone conference town hall to urge district taxpayers to contact the school board.

"It's in the board's hands," said Boyd, of the ongoing, four-year-long teachers contract negotiations between the school board and the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers.

The union is fighting for the 654 certified staff members that include teachers, librarian, nurses and counselors. The school board and teachers union are currently in nonbinding arbitration.

By phone blast on Tuesday, the union reached out to 6,201 homes within the district notifying them of Wednesday's phone town hall. In all, more than 2,300 households listened in Wednesday night.

About 600 callers called in with questions Wednesday night, with about 15 participants speaking live during the 45-minute conference call. Boyd answered questions, sometimes in vague terms or with little details while at other times pointing fingers at the nine-member school board, which she repeatedly said wouldn't sit to negotiate.

Boyd, who delivered an opening statement before taking calls, was the moderator and referred to callers by first names.

A caller identified as Janet wanted to know why the board should agree to the union's proposal if the district's PSSA scores have been less than impressive in recent years.

Boyd responded she was saddened the district hasn't met AYP, but noted it's been a "subgroup" of students who haven't met the requirement, which, in turn, reflects on the entire district.

Stephanie, a mother of two Neshaminy High School graduates, said she supported the teachers "1,000 percent." She's "livid" with the board for its unwillingness to sit down "as educated people" to negotiate the contract. As for taxpayers, she said they have to think about their property values, and seniors should have known "what they were getting themselves into" living within Neshaminy School District. If they don't like it, "they could go to Florida," Stephanie added.

Pete questioned the board's reasons for its unwillingness to sit down to negotiate.

Boyd responded the board is "comfortable" with the savings the district is accumulating from not paying increased wages for teachers the past four years.

In answering a related financial question from another caller who touched on the board's comment that it doesn't have money, Boyd said that in the past two years there hasn't been a tax increase, and the district has been saving about \$5 million each year from not paying salary increases.

Another caller, Charlie, heard around town that the teachers might strike again.

By state law, the teachers are allowed to go on strike again, Boyd said. And "unfortunately" the teachers will strike if the union and board can't come compromise, she said, adding that it "will be our only option."

In her opening comments, Boyd touched on this month's eight-day teacher strike saying, "Staying out of our schools and away from our students was not an easy decision for us. But it was an action we took because the school board left us no other option. After four years of unproductive negotiations, we felt that we had to do something to make the board understand that we must work together to settle our differences so we can all refocus on our most important mission - educating Neshaminy children."

She added that the strike was a way to cause awareness of the impact of the contract stalemate on public schools, and to get the school board to sit down to negotiate and clear up misconceptions.

"First, teachers are not demanding free health insurance; we have offered to pay a significant part of the premium costs and we have proposed changes in the plan that would save more money for the district," Boyd said. "Second, this contract is about much more than pay and benefits. We are seeking to preserve teachers' professional voice in the decisions that determine what kind of education our children receive. That kind of collaboration in our schools is just as critical as doctors and nurses having real input in patient care and treatment."

Boyd said the teachers are willing to pay a fixed 8 percent toward health care, plus have proposed sweeping health care plan changes that would save the district millions of dollars each year.

The certified staff would pitch in 8 percent of the total cost of approximately \$2,000 for a family or \$160 under the current proposal.

"Callers listen in on teachers town hall" [Bucks County Courier Times](#) 26 Jan 2012: A3