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TEACHERS CALL FOR NEW APPROACH BY SCHOOL BOARD

Re-Elected NFT Officers Say Budget and Other Issues Require Working Together

LANGHORNE, PA (May 3, 2012)—The newly re-elected leaders of the Neshaminy Federation of Teachers today called on the Neshaminy School Board to cease its confrontational strategy and work with teachers and parents to do what's best for students in the schools.

Last week's announcement by the School Board and recommendation by Superintendent Louis Muenker for drastic cuts in programs and staff are "the latest examples of the scare tactics being used by the District to alarm students and their parents, teachers and staff, and the community in general," said NFT President Louise Boyd. Recommended cuts included closing The Learning Center at Neshaminy, delaying school bus leases and eliminating 36 staff positions throughout the system.

"The Neshaminy community is being told that all of these actions are necessary because of a projected budget shortfall for the coming year," Boyd said. "However, when we asked to sit down with school officials to talk about the details and potential impacts of these extensive cuts, we were told that the budget information is not yet solid enough to make decisions or even meet to discuss the possibilities."

Boyd likened the District's actions to "pulling the fire alarm before they know there is a fire." That approach, she said, is hurting students and dividing the community.

"Closing The Learning Center and making major staff cuts would have huge implications for our students," Boyd said. "When school officials choose to make such premature announcements—before they really know the budget bottom line—we can only assume that they are more interested in manipulating public opinion than they are in making sure that our community has the best school system possible," she added.

Board members and some administrators “seem willing to ignore the highly emotional reactions that such ill-formed scenarios engender among students, parents and other stakeholders in the Neshaminy public schools,” she said.

“We know that there are real challenges facing our school system, but we must not react irrationally,” Boyd said. “We can solve things without hurting students if we just work together—like we did recently when teachers and the school district joined the new health insurance consortium that will mean substantial cost savings.”

Leaders of the teachers union noted the consistent pattern in the Board’s budget process over the last several years in which the Board starts with projections of big deficits that in every instance have turned out to be overstated and inaccurate. “The Board members are accountable to the voters who elected them, but they are deliberately avoiding transparency in District fiscal matters and seem intent on making confusion the hallmark of their budget deliberations,” said Jeffrey Dunkley, an NFT vice president. “We hope they will stop making decisions with limited or no community input.”

The District and the NFT are awaiting a state arbitrator’s decision in the four-year deadlock in their contract talks. The nonbinding arbitration report is expected at any time.

Boyd, Dunkley and all other incumbent NFT leaders were overwhelmingly re-elected last week by the union’s membership. “The NFT leadership has the confidence of Neshaminy teachers. Our members reaffirmed that with their votes to re-elect us,” Boyd said. “It’s time for the Board to accept that fact and deal with it. It’s time for this Board to stop using scare tactics aimed at teachers and the community, and instead make a good-faith effort to work together.”

Neshaminy teachers have pointed to other recent actions by the Board that seem aimed at delaying a contract settlement and perpetuating the strained relationship between the union and the school District. Among those, teachers said, were the creation of an arbitrary and artificial deadline for the NFT to decide whether members would participate in the new health insurance consortium, and the Board’s refusal to work with teachers in any collaborative way. NFT leaders also noted that every Board member they have asked has declined an invitation to a national conference on teacher-district collaboration scheduled for later this year and co-sponsored by the U.S. Education Department, the American Federation of Teachers and the National School Boards Association.

“The Board has shown no interest in working together at any level,” said Anne Schmidt, an AFT vice president. “The premature announcement of proposed cuts last week clearly illustrates that fact. The District apparently is willing to make severe cuts at the middle and high school levels at the same time that there are hundreds of empty seats in our elementary schools. If they included teachers in their discussions, they would not have overlooked that inconsistency.”

Instead, Boyd said, the School Board “has cut itself off from the District’s most valuable asset—its teachers and other certified staff.” Even worse, she said, is that the Board has repeatedly joined in the teacher-bashing that its actions have helped to trigger in the community.

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