

MONTCLAIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

22 VALLEY ROAD ~ MONTCLAIR, NEW JERSEY 07042

WWW.MONTCLAIR.K12.NJ.US

PHONE: 973-509-4020 FAX: 973-509-0586



Superintendent of Schools
Weekly Community Message No. 8

Jonathan Ponds, Ed.D.

February 2, 2021

Dear Families, Caregivers and Staff,

As you know from Friday's message, members of my administration, legal counsel, and I have been negotiating with the Montclair Education Association (MEA) through a mediator since Saturday, January 23, in an attempt to reach an amicable resolution to enable the elementary school teachers and our elementary and K-5 Special Education students to return to hybrid, in-person learning.

Regrettably, I report to you that no resolution has been reached. We continue to provide additional documentation through the mediator and our talks remain open. We understand the MEA's need to feel certain that the district has secured a safe working environment.

We offered proposals to move forward with good faith mediation. First, we proposed using rooms across buildings **only** where HVAC equipment exists, and ventilation has been working (specifically the 181 "green rooms" originally identified by EI Associates in its October 16, 2020 report). Finally, we proposed that Kindergarten and Special Education staff and students begin in-person teaching and learning utilizing the Charles H. Bullock School, constructed in 2010. Our expectation was that following these agreements, we could then continue to address further concerns raised by the MEA. We also considered allowing teachers to report to in-person instruction for four hours, while working the remainder of their day remotely and off campus. Staff was assured that they would be provided with all appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) upon return to in-person instruction.

The status quo cannot continue; therefore, and with the support and direction of our Board of Education, I see no other option but to instruct our legal counsel to file a lawsuit against the MEA for a physical return to school. It is with a heavy heart that I take this action, having only served the community, the parents and guardians, my teaching staff, and students since July 2020.

I was hired by this Board of Education to educate our children. We have children who are suffering. Our children need the support and education provided by their teachers. Many of our children need the structure of in-person learning and the socialization that comes with being in a classroom with their peers, even if socially distanced.

If we maintain the status quo, no one prevails. Our staff is discouraged and defeated. Our parents are frustrated. There is a rift in the relationship between our community and our educators. I cannot in good conscience support this status quo. When forced to make a decision between competing interests, I will always do what is best for our students. I implore our teachers to return to the classroom for the benefit of our students, those who we have all been called to serve. And, I am committed to forging a trusting relationship with the MEA, the staff, and the community.

Lastly, you have my guarantee that I will continue discussions with the MEA and the mediator despite the filing of the lawsuit. As I also said on Friday, my belief is that a reasonable outcome can be developed collaboratively by all the stakeholders with our students' best interests in mind.

We seek to find a balance among many variables so that our students can begin an in-person experience and our teachers are confident that they will be provided a safe environment. I will continue to send you timely updates.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jonathan Ponds
Superintendent