

**South Orange-Maplewood Education Association
Rocio Lopez, President**

**Statement sent to the administration and board of education regarding
building re-opening in pandemic conditions 01-25-2021**

Following a reasonable effort in good faith to provide hybrid instruction to our students, I write to advise you of the necessity of SOMEA to return to all-virtual instruction effective Wednesday, January 27, 2021, given the unsafe conditions and ineffectiveness of the district's current operations. Please know this is not a decision SOMEA made lightly. Since the start of the pandemic, SOMEA has worked tirelessly to bridge the obstacles to the delivery of instruction to our students. For example, when the district sent staff home last spring without explicit guidelines on how to transition to remote instruction, teachers took it upon themselves to find creative ways to deliver curriculum. When the community asked for synchronous instruction come September and despite still having little to no professional development, teachers rose to the occasion and started the year with synchronous instruction. Indeed, despite being advised that live instruction need only be a component of each period, many teachers have delivered synchronous instruction rather than videos and asynchronous tasks from bell to bell. Further, when asked to switch to a new instructional platform with no training prior to the start of school, teachers trained themselves and subsequently students to be ready to deliver instruction via Canvas in September. Throughout this period, which has necessitated countless additional hours of planning, conferencing, and grading, teachers have not asked the district for anything other than regard for their physical safety and that of their families.

Most recently, despite the rising cases of COVID-19 worldwide, in New Jersey, and Essex County in particular, as well as reports of new variants which are so contagious and dangerous that our President deemed it imperative to place immediate flight bans on entering the United States to stem the tide of transmission, illness, and death, the district deemed it a fitting time to return to our buildings sooner than wait for the imminent immunization of educators. While SOMEA respectfully pointed out the ill-advised nature of this decision, it

nonetheless in good faith returned to buildings as directed. Yet that same good faith has been absent from our administration. By way of example, teachers, school staff, and students have been asked to endure deplorable conditions, such as temperatures which average 35 to 60 degrees all day, as windows need to be open in an attempt to offset the inefficient, antiquated ventilation systems in our buildings. In fact, our Superintendent in his most recent FAQs acknowledged that windows would be used by the district as alternative sources of ventilation in the absence of sufficient building systems. Yet even with this admission, teachers have been admonished by administration for having windows open, as the temperatures are freezing or near freezing in classrooms, and ordered to close windows in danger to themselves and students in the classroom. Or in Marshall School they were made to complete the day despite the building being without an operational boiler. Teachers and staff are already suffering the ill-effects of these freezing conditions, complaining of aches, chills and coughs, weakening their immune systems to attack by COVID-19.

Further, the lack of good faith by administration is evident in the discrepancies between the architects' report, who acknowledge that they are not experts in ventilation and filtration, and SOMEA's own walk throughs of the schools with our trained SOMEA Healthy and Safety Committee members. Similarly, administration has omitted reporting to teachers when workers have been sent into their rooms, some of whom have reported to the rooms without masks and when teachers complained, administration denied their presence despite video evidence. And then there are the occasions when administration has ordered teachers to amalgamate students in classrooms despite its promise to use cohorts to limit the spread of COVID-19 within the schools. Perhaps more disconcerting has been the failure of the district to quarantine students and staff after having contact in their school settings, with individuals who tested positive for the virus.

Additionally, administration's reckless disregard for the well being of its employees and children was evident in its intentional refusal to evacuate Clinton School or call the police or fire department following a gas leak which rendered teachers and students sick, instead requiring teachers to use sick time if their nausea, eye irritation, and dizziness didn't subside. No medical professionals were asked to screen students, and parents were not notified of this hazardous

condition. Equally disturbing is administration's decision to reprimand a teacher for being transparent with parents about the work orders she requested be completed in her room for the wellbeing of her students but which the district repeatedly ignored. Note that she was not reprimanded for requesting necessary work be completed, but for sharing with parents that such work had not been completed.

And such risks to the health and safety of others are not limited to the classroom. Our bus drivers and aides have reported students who dropped their masks so as not to cover their noses or who took off their masks entirely, and despite requests to wear them properly, continually refused during their ride. Indeed, staff have likewise observed a lack of social distancing in hallways as well as the lack of masks on students as they enter and exit buildings. Likewise, athletes on buses are not practicing the social distancing deemed appropriate by other county districts, instead leaving no space between students on buses, packing students to a bus. Given the COVID-10 deaths of two of our bus drivers last year, this blatant disregard of protocols and caution on buses is simply indefensible.

Perhaps most disingenuous is the administration's suggestion that it values the safety of SOMEA members while the Director of Human Resources first issued a blanket refusal to consider any teacher's request for accommodation due to risk factors associated with COVID-19. Following SOMEA's request that the district comply with the law, the district then engaged in a practice of ignoring requests for accommodations, many of which were made months prior to the scheduled return date of January 13th, instead advising staff that they would need to take sick days until such time as the district decided to review their application and in complete disregard for the cost of instruction to students, as SOMEA members were ready and willing to teach remotely and most students were not even in the building to warrant requiring teachers to be physically present. Rather it has been through the combined advocacy of community members on behalf of our teachers, for which SOMEA is extremely grateful, as well as the cost of legal representation that some – though not nearly all – of these requests by our high-risk members have been addressed to some degree.

The district's protestations of the safety of the buildings is equally evidenced in the Board of Education's unwillingness to grant SOMEA's request that the Board of Education hold its next meeting in person to address the questions and concerns of staff and community stakeholders using the same protocols it deems sufficient to mandate staff return to buildings, or that each Member attend school for full days so that they can answer questions and concerns based on first-hand experience with the conditions under which hybrid learning is actually functioning. As has been typical, SOMEA's pleas to its Board went unanswered.

Again, notwithstanding these clear indications of the failure of the district to make paramount the well being of its staff and students, SOMEA returned to these buildings to deliver instruction in good faith. But a return to virtual learning on just one day this past Friday made clear that there is absolutely no instructional benefit to returning to our buildings. Students and staff spoke ubiquitously to the inability to access the WIFI, the lack of devices and non-functioning devices in classrooms, the lack of charging stations for students, the incessant buffering and connectivity issues throughout lessons. Further, at the elementary schools, teachers were forced to break social distancing as so many of their students had technical difficulties which could not be addressed from six feet away. By comparison, teachers reported accomplishing more instruction in a single day on Friday from home than they did in three days within the district buildings.

In sum, while SOMEA has tried to make hybrid learning work in good faith, it has not been met with good faith by the district. Instead, the district has placed its desire for hybrid instruction, the efficacy of which has been proven subpar compared to the remote, synchronous instruction provided since September, as more important than the health and safety of all. While it has suggested that teachers should be willing to work under such intolerable conditions as newly coined essential workers, the reality is that educators trained to provide instruction to students. We are not emergency workers. (Indeed, the fact that the federal government has prioritized vaccines for medical personnel, police, and firefighters is evidence that we are not one and the same.) Further, while we appreciate the concerns raised about the mental health of our students, know that we care for our students but we are not mental health professionals and

consider it unreasonable to ask teachers to return to an unhealthy environment under the thinly-veiled disguise of promoting the well being of students. Social engagement is simply not possible in school right now. Moreover, the district should consider the mental anguish students would suffer to learn that a peer or adult contracted and died from COVID-19 as a result of hybrid learning. Furthermore, one of the areas for concern in this issue is the public perception of the hybrid model and that it may mean less screen time. By returning to in-person instruction right now, it doesn't mean a return to classroom instruction pre-pandemic. Students in a hybrid situation still remain on their computers so that they may interact with their remote classmates. In fact, they have more social interaction right now while fully remote, then they would in a hybrid situation. Once the Chromebook is closed, that student has lost her connection with her other classmates, and while she may be sitting in front of her teacher, the socialization opportunities are slim with physical distancing requirements.

We will continue to educate passionately but will do so from our homes until such time as temperatures are moderate enough to avoid bone-chilling working conditions in violation of minimum temperature standards and vaccines are made available to educators. We are nearing February and already vaccines are available to high-risk individuals, so a return to school is on the horizon. But to do so as numbers climb, variant strains are spreading, and under conditions which render actual instruction less effective, is not just fatuous but reckless. We will continue to do what we do best – provide passionate instruction -- from the safety of our homes. Please note that we delayed this decision until Wednesday, January 27th not only to provide parents an opportunity to make necessary plans for their children at home and to allow teachers to retrieve the materials they need to teach effectively, but also to permit eleventh graders to sit for the PSATs tomorrow at Columbia High School*. As always, SOMEA operates in the best interests of its students while safeguarding the health of its members.

For more information, please contact Rocio Lopez, President SOMEA via email: someapresident@gmail.com

*Please note this statement was written and sent to administration before the district's cancellation of testing due to inclement weather posted on district website 01-26-2021