



Standing Together For Public Education

For Immediate Release

January 22, 2021

MONTCLAIR EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

The Montclair Education Association was hoping to issue this release jointly with the Montclair Board of Education and Superintendent Dr. Ponds, but unfortunately this is not the case. Recognizing that there are many differences with the district on the issue of reopening, especially building readiness and organizational readiness, the MEA was prepared to meet and discuss these issues.

The safety of schools and buildings remains a priority for the Montclair Education Association. On January 21, 2021, the leadership of the MEA met with Dr. Jonathon Ponds, Superintendent and his senior leadership team, hopeful that we could discuss our list of concerns and he would be able to verify their remediations, repairs, and replacements with documentation. The MEA leadership team was scheduled to meet Dr. Ponds at nine in the morning but that meeting was rescheduled for later in the morning without explanation.

In the beginning of the meeting with Dr. Ponds and his senior administrative staff, the MEA requested documentation regarding classroom readiness. This documentation was not provided, and the MEA was met with hostility as Dr. Ponds blasted the leadership team for asking questions, inquiring about engineering reports, and other information about building readiness. After an hour, the business administrator sent over a document that listed which rooms would receive air purifiers. This was NOT the engineer's report Dr. Ponds referred to in January 21st article in the Montclair Local, rather it was a pdf document created by the district. In statements from Dr. Ponds previously, the district has about 400 purifiers with a possible addition of 200 more, and in the provided document, over 840 rooms need some form of remediation as stated within the original engineer's report. In terms of classroom readiness, there are many concerns with this report, especially with what's missing in terms of the rooms being remediated or repaired as needed. Some rooms that appeared on the original report are left off of January 21st report in its entirety.

When we again requested the documentation from the engineering company Dr. Ponds became frustrated and said both parties should break until 12:15pm. The MEA leadership returned to the Zoom call and waited for nearly an hour. He never returned. Then the MEA was notified via his secretary that he would not be returning to the call and he would contact MEA President, Petal Robertson later.

The MEA concerns and requests for information has remained consistent since the beginning of October. Dr. Ponds has stated that the engineering reports the MEA are seeking are on the Montclair Public Schools website; they are not. The buildings are not safe and the alleged plans regarding operations are vague and lack detailed information.

On January 21, 2021, during the meeting with Dr. Ponds, the MEA proposed the two parties find a resolution with the assistance of a third-party mediator from the Public Employee Relations Commission (PERC). The MEA received no response from the board until the afternoon of Friday, January 22, 2021. Mediation is scheduled for Saturday, January 23, 2021.

“We are just as confused as many members of this community. Obtaining documentation that the district claims to have, and upholding the meetings the district promised should not be difficult,” stated MEA President Petal Robertson. “However, it is our duty to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for our staff and a sound educational plan for our students. Dr. Ponds advised the association that we should always, ‘trust but verify’ and that is what we are doing. We have asked repeatedly for meetings, for reports, for information, and time and time again we are met with silence and obfuscation from the superintendent but no verification. We are still hopeful and willing, as we look forward to mediation tomorrow. The MEA is excited to begin the collaborative work of restoring our students, staff and families.”

Here are is a sampling of our concerns:

General safety for buildings and staff

Staff were told they would receive latex gloves and hand sanitizer. The secretarial staff working in the buildings have gone months without hand sanitizer and the gloves were locked up so they “would not be stolen.” The MEA has requested documentation regarding the cleaning supplies the district is using, specifically the application method of one of the disinfectants. The MEA has been told that a non-aerosol liquid cleaner is currently being used in foggers, to spray rooms. As the MEA leadership understands it, this use violates federal regulations. Additionally, the EPA has stated that foggers should not be used indoors in any setting except in healthcare settings. However, Anthony Bispo, Director of Buildings and Grounds, said he's been using this product in foggers within district buildings. At a meeting in the fall, the MEA requested documentation of products and application methods to confirm they were consistent with regulations. Bispo promised he would share such documentation, but never has. Again, these are just a few examples of the many issues we have encountered with regards to general safety.

Building plans for instruction

The district’s solution to ventilation is to keep all windows in each building open two hours before the school day and remain open all day long. Not only will this be too taxing on the very old ventilation system, it will also create less than adequate teaching and learning conditions. The districts suggested solution to staff was to have students in the classroom wearing coats, hats, and gloves. The district has yet to give a firm number of returning teachers and students, making confirmations of building placement difficult if not impossible.

Unsafe buildings and lack of remediation evidence

The old ventilation systems and air circulation vents remain a significant threat to our safety. Many are broken or in disrepair. In one classroom, the motor from an uninvent was pulled out of its casing and was just sitting atop the unit. And, just recently on January 20, 2021, we learned that a crew from the Montclair Fire Department responded to a school as a motor was smoking and overheating.

In the fall, after a series of walkthroughs with our industrial hygienist, the MEA found over 164 sinks in the district that did not function, meaning widespread hand washing would be impossible. We reported the issue, in the fall, and they remain unfixed.

These and other questions remain unanswered and unaddressed. We long for the days when we could walk into a classroom full of students and teach like we did back in February. Right now, the safety of our students, their families, our school staff, and community must take precedence over ease and convenience. There is no place we'd rather be than back in our classrooms with our students like normal times. Unfortunately, these are not normal times.

The members of the Montclair Education Association stand resolute that students and staff have a right to know that all steps are being taken to ensure their safe return to in-person instruction. It is our goal to work towards this in collaboration with the district and we will continue to be open to do so.

To view our reports, photos, and resources, please visit www.facebook.com/myMEAnj

The Montclair Education Association is the inclusive union representing more than 1,000 Montclair Public School District employees, including teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses, secretaries, operational aides, certified support staff, custodians, and buildings and grounds staff.