August 16, 2020

David Fleishman, Superintendent
Mayor Ruthanne Fuller
Ruth Goldman, Chair, School Committee
Members of the School Committee:
Bridget Ray-Canada, Ward 1
Margaret Albright, Ward 2
Anping Shen, Ward 3
Tamika Olszewski, Ward 4
Emily Prenner, Ward 5
Kathleen Shields, Ward 7
Matthew Miller, Ward 8

Dear Superintendent Fleishman, Mayor Fuller, Chairperson Goldman, and members of the School Committee:

I am writing this open letter to vehemently protest the recent approval by the School Committee of an immediate return, on September 16, of all students and staff to in person learning under a hybrid A/B/C model.

In approving Dr. Fleishman’s “Return to Learning” plan, you fail on all counts to support and protect the students and parents of the Newton Public Schools community, and you must retract that decision.

Under normal circumstances, our fine educators make whatever you ask of them work, however poorly conceived. They rise to the occasion. What the community sees is not your failure but their success.

This is different. *Your plan puts the entire Newton Public Schools community in harm’s way.* You are rushing us into the schools before the district is ready, because you fear conditions will not permit us to do so later. Your logic is: “Get those kids in the buildings before flu season begins, because then it won’t be possible.” You think: “Students and teachers have this one opportunity to build a connection in person. It’s urgent we not waste it.” You really are so naive as to think this is a good strategy. It is a devastatingly shallow and dangerous logic.

*We demand that you accept our proposal for a phased, careful, and safe reentry. Our plan offers what yours does not: a sustainable, consistent educational experience for all students this coming school year.*

We share with you here, and with the public, a synthesized presentation of the proposal we have put on the table during negotiations. Rather than enumerate the failings of your plan, I will let it stand in contrast to ours, and let the Newton community be the judge.
You have failed too, by any reasonable standard, to work collaboratively with the Newton Teachers Association as a bargaining partner.

We sent you a highly detailed information request in early July that would allow us to assess the efficacy of your health and safety efforts. To date we have still not received a reply. If you cannot answer our questions about health and safety, then how can you open the schools?

We presented you a proposal for reopening in mid-July. Almost none of that found its way into your “Return to Learning” plan. In negotiations we have consistently opposed an immediate A/B/C hybrid reopening, yet you unilaterally decided to open in an A/B/C hybrid model. In spite of the fact that this was on the negotiation’s table, we learned of your decision at the same time as our members, when David sent an email to staff sharing his recommendation. Moreover, in a transparent effort to mislead our members about the role the NTA had played in that decision, in that email, David cited elements that his plan shared with ours.

The School Committee’s constant reference to the role of the planning teams in creating its plan is the final charade. Just yesterday, one member of that team texted me furiously that she felt gaslighted by the district. None of the major, and most controversial, decisions found in the district’s plans were made on those teams, yet they are regularly cited as evidence of “educator input.”

In short, rather than work collaboratively with educators, you have chosen instead to put your efforts into creating the appearance of having worked collaboratively.

Once your plans were “complete,” in order to convince educators it is safe to return to the schools en masse on September 16, you brought in two medical experts to assuage their fears.

On Thursday, August 13, Drs Rochelle Walensky and Ashish Jha answered questions from our members. I do not doubt their medical expertise, but clearly they land on one end of the spectrum of medical opinion on whether it is safe to open schools. Dr. Jha said so himself in an interview with Jake Auchincloss that was taped in June: “I have to tell you, in the public health world, in the spectrum of most public health experts, I am on one end about being aggressive about trying to open up schools. Most of my public health colleagues think I am too aggressive, they think I am being too optimistic…”

Dr. Jha may be optimistic and aggressive, but he hit the nail on the head when he led off by saying that “we have to get this right.” And he seemed honestly interested in feedback on how we get young people in schools to follow social distancing protocols consistently. So are we.

Dr. Walensky presented herself as a tough pragmatist who gets things done, and she clearly thinks if the medical professionals under her supervision can be made safe, and made to feel safe, then so can educators. She may know doctors and their patients, but what she doesn’t know about educators and their students is a lot.

Yet despite their expressions of urgency that schools should open immediately in September, the irony is that their attempts to persuade us to do so actually bolsters the NTAs case that schools should first open remotely and then phase in in-person learning.
Their characterization of the medical professions evolving response to the pandemic is the key. They are not counting on a perfect vaccine to come riding in on a white horse to save us from the pandemic. They believe the battle against this pandemic will be won by increments. This late fall and early winter, they anticipate important breakthroughs in efforts to mitigate the impact of the virus: more accurate, cheaper, and faster testing, better therapies, and other “guardrails” against this virus’s spread and deadly effect.

They think we will likely be fighting this pandemic for at least this coming school year, and quite possibly the next. In their judgment, children can’t afford to be out of school that long. For this reason, they say, we need to learn to live with this pandemic, and this means opening schools to in person learning.

**Our proposal addresses precisely this concern. We offer a careful, measured reentry plan, emphasizing safety, and the ability to sustain our efforts while offering children a consistent educational experience. It allows the NPS to make better use of these coming guardrails, particularly faster testing, in conjunction with quarantining and contract tracing.**

Dr. Jha is correct: We have to get this right. And this means our efforts cannot be about getting kids back in the schools as soon as possible, fearing later we may not be able to do so at all. **It means our efforts must be about getting kids and teachers back in school safely, and keeping them there, safely.**

Retract your decision. Provide Newton’s fine educators a safe opportunity to offer our students the consistent, high quality educational experience this community has come to expect. We do not have room to learn from failure here.

Sincerely yours,

Michael J. Zilles
President, Newton Teachers Association