

CHEA Members of Thomas Paine  
Elementary School  
4001 Church Road  
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034

August 30, 2020

Dr. Joseph Meloche, Superintendent,  
and Members of the Cherry Hill Board of Education  
Cherry Hill Public School District  
Malberg Administration Building  
49 Ranoldo Terrace  
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034

Via: Email

Dear Dr. Meloche and Members of the Board of Education:

The teachers and staff of Thomas Paine Elementary School have been working diligently trying to prepare to return to school on September 8, 2020. However, even with the procedures and safeguards that have been put in place, we cannot overlook the fact that our lives and the lives of our family members will be at risk. The health, safety, and well-being of students, teachers, staff, and their families are the most important issues.

We are still in need of more training -- training to teach and serve students online and in the classroom at the same time, all the while caring for young children and/or elderly parents and needing to attend to our own health and well-being.

It is an unprecedented time we live in, but we want to be prepared and desperately need to keep the children and ourselves safe. We know as parents ourselves that we are trying to maintain the balance between supporting our children's learning and just wanting to make sure they feel safe, secure, and loved.

The world is watching as we work to make education viable during a pandemic. While teaching in person, and in a virtual world, we must tread carefully because the wrong steps or steps taken too early can have devastating effects. We as teachers have been pushing ourselves during this collective trauma and crisis and are trying not to be paralyzed with the fear of what will happen when this virus spreads throughout our school district and local community.

We have numerous concerns: the HVAC and air quality in most, if not all, of our buildings is inadequate to maintain a healthy environment, the physicians at CHOP's PolicyLab have issued a statement that, "New outbreaks could originate from schools very quickly if we don't do this right," and that schools in the tri-state area should hold off on in-person or hybrid learning at this time because they don't meet the criteria for the strict recommendations about safety, and we have questions as to whether there will be enough PPE available to all of our staff.

Our Paine teacher surveys show that 100% of the teachers do not feel ready to return to school based on current levels of understanding with new procedures and protocols for this school year, and 100% believe that we would benefit from a delay of reopening school in an effort to better prepare for all facets of the hybrid model (i.e., remote start, utilize all four inservice days prior to re-opening, etc.)

In addition, we are concerned that our school facilities, as well as the staff, are inadequate to handle the need for isolation rooms that should be set up by infectious disease specialists. We do not have a sink/bathroom or proper ventilation for an isolation room. We need at least to have HEPA purifiers in our health offices. The nurses have been informed by NJ medical personnel, including the new head of the health department that there is a need for N95 masks, a need for training of nurses, MD teachers, MD Ed assistants, and health office Ed assistants for proper PPE use and infection control. We need videos to present to staff and students regarding the proper way to wear and remove masks. We should have videos to show students and parents what a school day will look like.

We all feel we would benefit from starting the school year off remotely, to prepare all of our staff for in-person schooling. As we have many staff members with poor immune systems, many of us are simply terrified to return to school without the proper training.

The CDC guidelines for preventing the spread of the coronavirus is to “Practice good hygiene: Avoid social Gatherings in groups of more than 10 people.” Needless to say, our classrooms will be considerably more than 10 people in poorly ventilated classrooms. Additionally, the recent changes in the CDC guidelines regarding testing that state that “those who are asymptomatic do not need to be tested” will inevitably lead to more risk.

According to a recent article in National Geographic, “After six months of the worst public health crisis in a century, health experts across the country say the U.S. is perfectly capable of mounting a comeback if it embraces reality and taps its potential for ingenuity. First, we must knuckle down and accomplish the obvious: Continue social distancing and strive for universal mask use. Close high-risk spaces, such as churches, bars, and casinos. Spend time outdoors. Limit crowds.” We feel schools should also be on this list of high-risk spaces due to the sheer number of people in our buildings and the potential risk to students and staff.

As stated at the beginning of this letter, the health, safety, and well-being of students, teachers, staff, and their families are the most important consideration in determining whether school should reopen for in-person learning. We continue to be in full support of CHEA’s representation of our concerns. The survey gave our certificated staff members an opportunity to share our collective voices and the results speak volumes.

We appreciate your efforts and your consideration, but implore you to reconsider in-person teaching at this time.

Respectfully,

CHEA Members of Thomas Paine Elementary School

cc: Steve Redfearn