

Dr. Joseph Meloche
45 Ranoldo Terrace
Cherry Hill, NJ 08003

August 30, 2020

Dear Dr. Meloche;

As the summer draws to a close and we find ourselves working diligently to prepare for the start of a very unique school year, we feel compelled to share our concerns about the current plan to begin school and hope to be heard as we offer achievable ideas for ways to remediate these concerns.

Over the last several weeks, we have attended many in-services and trainings to build knowledge and skills that will help us implement online learning. In addition, we have spent countless unpaid hours of our summer vacation working in our classrooms and meeting with colleagues to plan for the upcoming year. Cherry Hill teachers continuously strive for excellence in their teaching practices and relationships with students, and our desire to be the best possible advocates for our students is no different this year. However, human response to the ever-changing pandemic has been a moving target, and there is no place this is truer than education. The lack of consistency and availability of information has made it impossible to properly plan for even the first week of school. It is essential that teachers have a considerable amount of time to work with clear expectations from the district as we collaborate with our colleagues to design comprehensive teaching plans.

On a district level, there are many gaps and flaws in infrastructure that could be corrected or improved with more time. We have all experienced many flaws in the technology provided by the district, and while we as adults have the maturity and patience to adapt when a leader or participant in a meeting is frozen or unintelligible, the young students we teach will surely be more frustrated and lose focus. Our plan would allow teachers to practice using technology, work out issues with both wifi and devices, and better support parents who are having difficulty navigating technological platforms. From a human resources perspective, we are very concerned that there will be a lack of substitutes and educational assistants to properly support school functioning. Teaching an in-person group of students and simultaneously livestreaming is challenging for the most experienced teachers. Asking a substitute to step in and figure this system out with little notice is simply not sustainable and has not been well thought out. The district has experienced substitute shortages in the past, but we are concerned that there will not be enough adults to properly supervise children under the current social distancing guidelines, let alone meet the requirements of IEPs. Time is needed for staff to further explore creative ways to improve that air quality and circulation in our buildings.

We humbly request that you consider delaying the start of hybrid schooling by just one week. This could be done by moving the two contractual in-service days that were planned for later in the year to be moved to Tuesday, September 8th and Wednesday, September 9th and making the new first two days of school – Thursday, September 10th and Friday, September 11th remote only days. Teachers could use the additional in-service time to work with colleagues and develop an effective plan to start the school year that is in conjunction with all school and district expectations. In addition, this time would allow teachers to practice using the available technology in school buildings and meet with our technology staff to become more proficient in

using software, address hardware concerns, and work out potential streaming issues. This could prevent a great deal of wasted instructional time and frustration amongst students, parents, and teachers due to preventable technical difficulties.

Changing the first two days of school to an all-remote format would benefit the entire community. Teachers and students could start the year off by meeting as a full group at the same time, allowing for all students to immediately feel like a part of their classroom community. This is a crucial foundation to academic excellence and character education. Furthermore, this time would allow parents to use their digital connections and explore online platforms at a time that teachers can be available to support them and trouble shoot issues. In turn, students and parents alike will be prepared when the time comes to navigate livestreaming and asynchronous learning.

Dr. Meloche, throughout the last several years when our district budget has been tight, you have touted the teachers and staff of our district as our number one asset. Additionally, our staff has been very appreciative throughout this pandemic as you have encouraged us to practice self-care. We are asking that you take this moment to demonstrate our value by listening to our collective VOICE and providing us with the time and opportunity to navigate this new frontier while also properly caring for ourselves, our students and their caregivers. Many of the teachers at Sharp have conditions that increase our risk of Covid-19 complications. We are willing to put our health and the health of our families at risk because we so deeply care about our students and our community. We implore you to strongly consider giving us the best chance possible to give them the excellence that they deserve.

Sincerely,

The Staff of J.D. Sharp Elementary School