



Memorandum

To: Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, School Committee Members, and Superintendent Fleishman and Commissioner Deborah Youngblood
From: Councilors Josh Krintzman, Marc Laredo, Becky Grossman, Emily Norton, David Kalis, Brenda Noel, Alicia Bowman, Pam Wright, Maria Greenberg, Julia Malakie, Chris Markiewicz, Lisle Baker, Alison Leary, Lenny Gentile and Holly Ryan
Re: Reopening our Schools for In-Person Learning
Date: January 26, 2021

On January 10, 2021, over two-thirds of the City Council wrote to you “to urge immediate action to increase the opportunities for in-person learning within the Newton Public Schools.” In our letter, we asked that “the Administration and the School Committee: (1) establish public health parameters for a safe return to school this year; (2) form an expert advisory committee; (3) expand testing of NPS employees; and (4) plan now for full in-person learning next year.”

On January 15, 2021, Mayor Fuller, Commissioner Youngblood, and Superintendent Fleishman responded to that letter. Unfortunately, we do not believe that the letter, or the measures described in it, properly address the sense of urgency shared by parents, teachers and students all across the city or the specific requests that we made.

In-person learning expansion this year

The response we received fails to mention how we are going to get to much more in-person learning *this year* other than a vague statement that [w]ith the vaccine on the horizon, NPS is exploring the implications for additional in-person learning for the spring.” While having more people vaccinated will certainly help facilitate in-person learning, there are other opportunities for in-person learning that are not vaccine-dependent that could be implemented immediately, with additional opportunities becoming available as the weather gets warmer in the spring. More than 10 months into this pandemic it is time to act.

Expert Advisory Committee

The working group that was described does not constitute the expert advisory committee that is needed. There is no mention of the identity of the consultants and the medical professionals with whom you are speaking or their qualifications. Over 100 physicians in our community have called for the creation of a true advisory committee and we support their efforts. Frankly, we do not understand the continued refusal to avail ourselves of the incredible talent in our community. The use of “effective, fact-based approaches and protocols from trusted researchers, scientists and medical professionals” is excellent. However, the lack of details regarding the approaches, protocols or identities of the trusted researchers, scientists and medical professionals leaves a lot to be desired.

Expanding Testing

The only discussion of implementing expanded testing now was to state that a testing program was started in December. But our physician and science experts tell us that our current program is not adequate (and is scheduled to end in February). Many other communities already have robust testing programs in place. Establishment of another working group, especially one that does not have a significant number of scientific and medical experts, does not promptly address the situation or the urgency of the need. If we are going to

have a working group, it should have a short deadline (ten days or two weeks, for example) within which to provide specific recommendations and an action plan for immediate implementation.

Full in-person instruction in the Fall

Finally, “planning for the fall with the goal of the option of full in-person teaching and learning for families” is insufficient. There continues to be a dearth of explanation regarding what, specifically, is preventing significantly more in-person learning at this time. In addition, we should reassure parents and students that there will be a full in-person learning option for students at all levels in September 2021 while working to ensure that it happens safely.

As we evaluate the budget proposal for the upcoming school year, we will be looking closely to see what assurances are provided that all students who wish to return to school will be able to do so. Given what has transpired this year, we hope that we will receive far greater specifics as to what that will entail.

The Biden administration has issued an executive order assuring states and cities across the country that, “it is the policy of [the Biden] Administration to provide support to help create the conditions for safe, in-person learning as quickly as possible.” Like the Biden administration, we remain ready, willing and able to assist you in any and all of these efforts.