

July 28, 2020

To the Editor:

Teachers and school staff want nothing more than to return to our classrooms. We entered this profession to interact in-person with children in order to help them grow as students, individuals, and members of the community. Our desire to return to normalcy is even more acute after experiencing the exceptional challenges of conducting remote instruction this past spring. There is incontrovertible evidence that classroom instruction promotes the best outcomes for most students.

School employees are also vigilant about concerns over the health and safety of our students and staff. Last week, VEA president Dr. Christopher Tamburro was a signatory on a letter penned by the president of the Essex County Education Association, of which the VEA is an affiliate, which took the position that state and county leaders must delay the resumption of in-person instruction because it is simply not safe to do so at this time. Every local president in the county endorsed this statement.

Despite these concerns, the State of New Jersey currently requires in-person instruction to commence in the fall. Thus, our staff must enter a potentially unsafe environment in September. This prevents local authorities from making the best decisions based on their unique circumstances.

In order to facilitate the return to classroom instruction, the Department of Education mandated that all school districts prepare a reopening plan to be presented to the county superintendents and the public four weeks prior to scheduled opening. Verona can present its plan as late as approximately August 14 due to our planned calendar delay.

Our teachers and staff were surprised to read an email to the community from Superintendent Rui Dionisio on Friday, July 24, which outlined reopening details. This was not a complete plan, but rather fragments of the necessary final product: a detailed, multi-faceted approach to the instruction, logistics, and health issues for our schools.

This email was a shock to many of our professionals, as there are scores of staff participating on committees and subcommittees which were convened to develop comprehensive plans for this fall. These committees have yet to finish their work. Some had only met once or twice prior to the dissemination of these details. They had not completed their deliberations. Most of us have felt heard by the front-line administrators who facilitate those small groups with genuine concern for our staff and students. Unfortunately, our discussions and recommendations did not translate to the published decisions made by the senior administrators. This leads us to question the efficacy of the committees.

This past weekend, VEA executive committee members received dozens of phone calls, emails, and text messages from staff and community members who demonstrated great concern over the contents of the message and its timing. While our staff have been participating on these committees, we have been largely compartmentalized. The administration has notes of all meetings to share among themselves, but the staff do not have access. We are not meeting by building to design the best reopening plans with input from the frontline practitioners. Our executive administration has made it clear that our staff are providing input, but have no place in the decision-making process.

In an email reply to the VEA executive committee on Monday, July 27, Dr. Dionisio pointed out that Association members comprise about 60% of our stakeholder committees. However, the communication stated that our role is limited to insight and feedback, and that the administration is developing the final plan. Simply put, teachers and staff, those on the front-line, make up 60% of the committees, but have 0% of the decision-making power. Of the 90 VEA volunteers, there are none in the room when the final decisions are made.

While Dr. Dionisio indicated that the executive administration chose to incorporate pieces of our feedback on items like technology and masks, a great deal more was put forward to the community. The email stated that the staff was intentionally kept in the dark prior to notification of the community due to fear of leaks. This prevents us from providing insight on the plan prior to it being distributed, which will only lead to the need to revise it more in the future, causing more confusion during an already difficult time.

We understand that the managers of the district must make difficult choices; however, this should be completed through shared decision-making with staff, parent, and student representatives on the decision-making body who have full access to the products of committee deliberations. Buildings must hold plenary sessions in order to truly provide opportunities for collaboration. The front-line staff must be included.

Therefore, the Verona Education Association cannot endorse at this time any plans or fragments thereof presented by the district to the community. Please do not consider district communications such as that of July 24 to be necessarily representative of the professional opinions of our teachers, medical staff, counselors, child study team members, administrative assistants, custodians, maintenance staff, technicians, and paraprofessionals.

We sincerely hope that VEA representatives, parents, and students will be brought to the table before any further plans are finalized and distributed. Fortunately, there is still time to incorporate collaboration into revising details of the plans that were distributed last Friday. There remains an incredible opportunity for a fully transparent, productive process.

Sincerely,

Dr. Christopher Tamburro
President

Carol Thomas
First Vice President

Diana Romano
Second Vice President

Heather Darata
Treasurer

Corrie Majestic
Secretary

Megan Pellegrino
Negotiations Chairperson

VERONA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
Executive Committee
Verona, NJ

The Verona Education Association is the union and professional association that represents the 280 teachers, medical staff, counselors, child study team members, administrative assistants, custodians, maintenance staff, technicians, and paraprofessionals who work in the Verona Public Schools.