

Dr. Christopher Tamburro, President
Diana Romano, Vice President
Heather Darata, Treasurer
Corrie Majestic, Secretary

September 17, 2020

Dr. Rui Dionisio, Superintendent of Schools
Verona Public Schools
121 Fairview Avenue
Verona, NJ 07044

Dear Dr. Dionisio:

Thank you for arranging to discuss a health and safety walk-through of the five open school buildings operated by the Verona Board of Education on Wednesday, September 9, 2020 in response to our request on Monday, August 31, 2020. We appreciate you also arranging at our request for Mr. Higgins, Mr. James, and the principals to be present. As you are aware, I was joined by NJEA Consultant and environmental scientist Mr. Edward Lesser. Mrs. Freschi later joined the walk-throughs.

During the tours of the buildings, we noted several concerns. The following concerns were present in more than one building.

1. Inadequate/no ventilation (air intake and exhaust) in classroom bathrooms;
2. Inadequate/no ventilation (air intake and exhaust) in student bathrooms;
3. Inadequate/no ventilation (air intake and exhaust) in faculty bathrooms;
4. Inadequate/no ventilation (air intake and exhaust) in a nurse's office bathrooms.
5. Inoperable/no or broken unit ventilators;
6. Windows that were broken or do not fully open;
7. Windows that are dangerous to open due to fall risk;
8. CST Offices that do not have unit ventilators, exhaust ventilation, or more than one window;
9. Main offices that only had air/heating split units that did not provide ventilation;
10. Rooftop ventilation/HVAC that was inoperable;
11. Inability to identify the fresh air components in rooftop units;
12. Filters were maxed at MERV 7 or 8 due to system constraints;
13. Not enough unique spaces at HBW Middle School for staff to teach simultaneously remote or otherwise and/or have mask breaks. This included the unsafe plan that staff could teach in hallways where there is not fresh air or mechanical ventilation;
14. There is no safe way for faculty to eat after they have been exposed to students. You noted in your replies to questions from VEA members that teachers can use the cafeterias. These rooms are being used for students in both HBW and FN Brown, so this is impossible.
15. Lack of hand sanitizer stations in classrooms;

Verona's teachers, medical staff, counselors, child study team members, administrative assistants, custodians, maintenance staff, paraprofessionals, and technicians united in service to our community and profession.

16. Staff had been working in spaces without adequate natural ventilation;
17. Lack of a cohesive plan to explain ventilation requirements to staff returning to work; and
18. Lack of a plan to provide necessary ventilation when the temperature decreases and opening windows creates a health and safety risk due to cold.

We recognize that the district has prioritized these issues, and has made some made repairs to address certain items. We hope that this effort will continue. We also recognize that many of these issues would have been resolved with referendum bids on the five schools in question. However, it is clear that there are some issues that the district is unable to resolve, or is not planning to address. Lack of referendum repairs, however, cannot serve as rationale for unsafe workplace and educational environments. Further, we requested information on the specific filters in all unit ventilators and rooftop units, but we have yet to receive that information. Please provide this as soon as possible. We have also not received updates from you about any of the aforementioned items.

It was gravely concerning to Association representatives present that when we questioned you about the District's plan for when temperatures are lower, your response was to "layer up" and Mrs. Freschi added that [students and staff should] "wear a coat." Not only was this unproductive, but these responses failed to address the serious issue that we brought forth during what was intended to be a problem-solving exercise.

Due to the fact that the district has reported that the ventilation units in those five schools will accept no higher than a MERV 7 or MERV 8 filter, the only existing mechanism for providing anywhere near adequate classroom and office ventilation is through the use of open windows and fans providing exhaust. The unit ventilators bring in approximately 20% fresh air, and then recirculate the remaining. Since filters below MERV 13 are not able to prevent the recirculation of the most basic COVID particulate, window ventilation is the only mechanism allowing for the buildings to be safely open. Windows must be open *all day, including before school hours*, to provide this ventilation. When the temperature drops, this will force cold air into classrooms, bringing classroom and office temperatures lower while exposing students and staff to wind gusts and moisture.

Cold and humid air can exacerbate existing medical conditions, and can complicate even the simplest, often undetectable illnesses. It is unacceptable that the current district plan is for our students and staff to potentially contract other serious illnesses in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This will clearly put not only our staff, but also our children in danger. It will further put great strain on HVAC systems that will attempt to increase temperature to no avail to meet the lower thermostat readings. "Layering up" is not an answer. Our membership was perplexed by these statements and why we have to ask for clarification in a letter. These remarks betrayed a significant lack of concern for the safety and health of our students and staff.

We request and expect that the district effectively collaborate with the Association to provide safe working environments for all of its staff and students. It is important to note that while you stated that ventilation was not necessary if staff are working alone in classrooms, this is simply not the case. This causes headaches and respiratory symptoms. In addition, classroom and office doors open throughout the day, which exposes those places to particulate from hallways.

The New Jersey PEOSH standards continue to apply for public employers during the COVID-19 environment. We must also follow recommendations and guidelines from the NJ Department of Education, ASHRAE, and the CDC in order to keep all faculty and students safe. Please remember that these are all *minimum* standards. Verona should be doing far better than meeting the minimums. There are workable engineering and administrative solutions to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter of the highest importance. We will interpret the lack of a complete answer by September 24, 2020 to be nonresponsive.

Sincerely,

VERONA EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

/S/

Dr. Christopher Tamburro
President

c: VEA Executive Committee
Verona Board of Education
Luis Delgado, NJEA UniServ Field Representative
Edward Lesser, NJEA UniServ Consultant