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***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

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***South Orange & Maplewood School District Hopes For a Positive Outcome  
in SOMEA Disagreement***

**February 19, 2021** – The South Orange & Maplewood School Board hopes to resolve recent disagreements with our local teacher’s association, SOMEA. As the union is scheduled to meet with the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) today for a mediation hearing, the Board is hopeful that an outcome can be reached as it is undoubtedly consistent with the community stakeholders’ interests to resume in-person instruction as soon as possible.

Early evening on Monday, February 15, our local Association that represents many of our educators, SOMEA, directed its members to not report to schools to continue in-person hybrid instruction. On February 17<sup>th</sup> the Association expanded its stoppage to include bus drivers that refused to drive completely unoccupied buses and support staff, including secretaries and registrar personnel that work alone or with limited other personnel in large workspaces where they are socially distanced well-beyond the minimum six feet.

The Board previously negotiated with SOMEA regarding the building-related concerns they raised in their January 25 letter. The Board’s labor counsel has been in contact with SOMEA representatives regarding the current circumstances and since their Jan. 25 letter, the Board and Administration have chosen to work with the Union to do all we can to negotiate in good faith and be empathetic to the concerns that teachers and other employees have during the Pandemic. However, we were disappointed and blind-sided by SOMEA’s decision to not have teachers’ report for in-person teaching for Tues., February 16. After reviewing SOMEA’s most recent letter, the District respectfully disagrees with regard to SOMEA’s assessment regarding rooms, safety measures, and other issues presented.

SOMEA agreed that concerns could be addressed through our grievance process, but that was not allowed to continue to fruition. Our building administrators have been responsive to the needs put forward. While the District facilities are old, they are safe. Even in the best years, systems break down, it gets hot or cold in a room and we take action to fix it. We’ve had poorer weather this year than the last three years combined, which is unfortunate. But because so few students are in the buildings and we have a Sidebar Agreement, principals were relocating a small population of teachers as needed on a daily basis to put them in suitable rooms. Just like with anything else, we had to prioritize our responses to complaints and grievances, and there needed to be some patience to allow our facilities staff time to look into the issues presented.

We are continuing forward with a professional mediation process and we will also pursue any other legal options as agreed upon by our District counsel. We do this not because we are angry with our teachers, but because we love our students and are committed to serving our families who have been not only patient but very supportive.



In addition, we have been committed to being transparent, developing and launching a weekly dashboard of COVID-19 infections, and publicly acknowledging when there have been missteps along the way. The District has and continues to prepare rooms consistent with guidelines established by The Road Back, the New Jersey Department of Health, Federal CDC Guidance, and Industry standards. We take this work very seriously and we would not open the schools if we did not believe we could do it in a safe and healthy manner for both staff and students.

Dr. Ronald G. Taylor, SOMSD Superintendent, states, “We’re not doing anything unique by returning for in-person instruction. Hundreds of schools are doing this to a greater degree than we are. In our instance, we have chosen to implement a measured reopening approach consistent with what we’ve determined is safe for our community and staff.”

As a District, we stand by science and data. Unequivocally, the science and data both nationally and from our Phase 3 days in-person, support what we already know...if students and staff follow mitigation steps (masks, social distancing, and hand hygiene) the chances of school-based transmission of COVID-19 are very unlikely. We designed our reopening re-entry approach to be phased so that we would be able to be nimble and shift/pause if necessary. We designed our approach to get our most vulnerable students in first (Pre-K-2nd, 6th, and 9th) and most often (Special Services and English Language Learners). We were conservative, as most classes had 5 or fewer students in them.

Dr. Taylor also shares, “The NJ Department of Education has given every family a choice as to whether to be fully remote or to go in-person consistent with the District’s plan. The families that have chosen to have their children resume in-person instruction have relied on us to provide safe in-person instruction, and in good faith, we have been providing that.”

The District’s primary goal at this point is for students and staff to return for in-person instruction safely within the rooms that have already been designated by the District as “ready”, meaning they meet safety standards. We want to bring students back to school and most importantly serve them during a time when they are most vulnerable.

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### **About the South Orange & Maplewood School District**

The School District of South Orange and Maplewood serves close to 7,000 students in ten schools, including one early-childhood center, six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. The community and its schools are racially and economically diverse with more than 90 percent of Columbia High School graduates planning to attend college each year. The mission of the South Orange Maplewood School District is to empower and inspire each student to explore and imagine, to pursue personal passions, and to collectively create a better future by creating a learner-centered environment through multiple pathways; re-imagined structures, systems and supports; innovative teaching; partnering with families; and maximizing community expertise and resources.