

Dear South Orange-Mapelwood Community,

SOMEA finds itself in the repeated and forlorn position of having to advise you of the necessity to return to all-virtual instruction effective Tuesday, February 16, 2021 through March 15, 2021. Indeed, SOMEA members were excited by the prospect of seeing their students in person again under the belief that they would do so under the terms of the January 27th Agreement and with strict safety protocols enforced. Their hopes were sorely dashed by the district. Despite SOMEA's extensive good-faith efforts to deliver hybrid instruction to targeted student populations while mitigating the real dangers to the safety and well-being of members and students and its willingness to proceed without access to vaccines, the district is not capable of and not willing to comply with its Agreement to do so.

Indeed, that the district never intended to comply with the Agreement is perhaps best evidenced by the clear directive central office administration sent to its building administrators to disregard the express terms of the Agreement. Specifically, while the district agreed that the only classrooms fit for use in the midst of an airborne contagion pandemic are those with working motors/blowers capable of maintaining adequate ventilation **and** room temperatures of 68-79 degrees with open windows, central office administration directed building administrators to place staff and students in rooms meeting only **one** of these requirements. (Specific evidence of the district's bad faith can be found in SOMEA's Letter to the Board linked below.) In hindsight, SOMEA's good faith efforts were in vain from the start. The district's intention to ignore the Agreement was first evident during the walkthroughs when building administrators shut windows to circumvent accurate room temperature readings with the necessary fresh air component.

Notwithstanding these obvious signs of the district's intention not to comply with the Agreement, SOMEA staff returned to the buildings as promised on Monday, February 1st. While we uniformly expressed joy at seeing our students in person, from this first day through this Thursday, we have had to address dozens of instances across buildings of staff and students being placed in unfit rooms and administration failing to remedy these violations either by feigning repeated ignorance to the conditions of rooms, claiming outright they were not bound by the results of SOMEA's walkthroughs, or directing staff to shut windows in order to increase freezing room temperatures, which in turn, precluded adequate ventilation, or to mix cohorts by teaching multiple classes in the same room along with other non-essential personnel present. This chaos led to significant losses of preparation time and instruction riddled with unnecessary interruptions. Perhaps most egregious is the fact that the district has blamed SOMEA for its dilapidated buildings and years of neglect resulting in these situations.

Further, despite its promise to allow high-risk staff the reasonable accommodation to work from home, the district has failed to process or outright denied members' applications. These individuals have been made to take sick days. Thus, the district has prioritized punishing members for having such medical conditions by forcing them to exhaust sick leave and not teach when they desperately desire to do so over remote delivery of instruction to our students. By working remotely as a membership, SOMEA seeks to prioritize instruction for each and every student. Finally, SOMEA has witnessed safety hazards and violations of the district's plan for returning to school which warrant its return to remote instruction. Significantly, SOMEA has provided visual evidence of the district's failure to adhere to safety protocols by cleaning daily, maintaining strict cohorts, and offering contested reporting of COVID cases on its Dashboard.

Based on the foregoing reasons, SOMEA will continue to educate students passionately but remotely through March 15, 2021. This date recognizes the anticipated severe weather predicted over the ensuing weeks and allows the district the opportunity once again to conduct necessary repairs and upgrades to its buildings' systems and to grant 504 requests so that it is ready to operate on March 15th as promised to provide students and staff with a safe environment conducive to learning. SOMEA stands at the ready to assist administration in this endeavor. As always, SOMEA will deliver quality instruction while also addressing the emotional needs of its students. We would like nothing more than to be able to return to school with our students, but we need the district to uphold its obligations to implement a return to school which remediates its serious deficiencies thus far and collaborates with SOMEA on how best to proceed with in-person instruction based on science and the varying needs and risks associated with each cohort of students. In that vein, SOMEA recognizes the greater need for certain at-risk groups within our student population for in-person instruction as soon as possible. Accordingly, we offer to meet with district administration immediately to develop a specific plan with agreed upon room usage and cohort schedules to allow those students to continue hybrid instruction during this remote instructional period consistent with the Agreement. Additionally, as we have asked our members, we would also like to ask all community stakeholders to request in writing from our elected officials that they expedite the approval of funds from the bond to upgrade the ventilation of all our buildings.

The South Orange and Maplewood Education Association

Please see the whole document sent to the Board:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/12wSthBpPm7PTexOU1UBc1Opnr_VEpnad/view?usp=sharing