



THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF  
**South Orange  
& Maplewood**

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Dear South Orange & Maplewood School District Family, Staff, and Community,

I am writing to offer you an update on some of the recent challenges we have been facing as a District. As I shared during a recent Board of Education meeting, I consider myself fortunate to lead a District that so passionately debates how we can best educate our children in both the most rigorous and equitable manner – with an eye toward diversity and inclusion.

I do believe that most, if not all, of us share the common goals of wanting to create a more equitable District for our children and secure a better future for our community at large through our children's brighter futures. But despite the common ground we share, the climate within the District has become divisive. Recently, there has been more fighting among us than fighting for what is right. There has been more destructive misinformation than constructive conversations. There have been more efforts made in service to agendas than in service to our students and families. There has been more talking and criticizing than listening and creating.

What we are currently experiencing is not typical, based on my 28 years as a public educator – 22 as a school administrator and 13 as a superintendent of schools. By definition, my role is apolitical. I am not a politician. I was entrusted with the duty of leading this wonderful school district, and I intend to bring this District to better, more productive, and successful days.

But I cannot do it alone. I need your help. Any success this District has achieved has been the result of everyone working together. One of the best examples of a successful collaboration is our fantastic Senior Leadership Team. They are a dedicated and dynamic group of professionals who truly represent the vision we discussed when the Board of Education set the District Goal of a new Central Office organization. They faithfully, and sometimes thanklessly, serve the District's students, families, and staff.

It is my hope that all of us – families, staff, teachers, and administrators – can learn to work as collaboratively as the Senior Leadership Team. In order to do that, we must begin anew starting from the empirical truth. As I often say during our Board of Education meetings, "I want to ensure we all leave with the same information." That is why I am providing with this letter, responses to the allegations made in the SOMEA leadership's no confidence resolution. Let the record be set straight and may we move forward with our shared goal in support of our students' academic and social-emotional best interests.

Yours in education,

Dr. Ronald G. Taylor  
Superintendent of Schools

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## Responses To The SOMEA Leadership's Resolution

### Reframing Courses To Provide Greater Academic Opportunities To More Students

*Allegation: Unilaterally pursuing a revised policy of equity and access, calling for the elimination of academic levels throughout the District without collaboration with all stakeholders and without providing any specific plan or protocols or budget for the implementation of said policy and then doubling down on the so-called autocratic exercise of power to adopt a policy of his choosing without any need to hear the opinions of stakeholders when the BOE reasonably demanded evidence that he had collaborated with stakeholders before a first read of his proposed revised policy.*

**District Response:** Just a quick point of order: The Superintendent cannot put an item on the Board meeting agenda. The Board policy states that an item can be added to the agenda when at least two Board members request it through an email to the Executive Committee, who are the president and the two vice presidents. For the October 18th meeting, Board members Bill Gifford, Qawi Telesford, and Courtney Winkfield requested that the Access and Equity resolution that they created be added to the agenda for a first reading.

What has been called “deleveling” is really the restructuring of courses to ensure more students have greater access to more rigorous, higher-level courses in middle school and high school. In other words, we're working to open more opportunities for students to get into honors and AP-level courses. We are not getting rid of courses or dumbing them down.

Although research and planning are underway in other content areas, our main focus right now is math. In looking at the math data from the past few years, two problems are apparent. First, courses taught in middle school and high school may have had the same name, but they were not covering the same content. For example, a student who took Algebra 1 in middle school was not getting the same content as a student taking Algebra 1 in high school. Also, we found that in 2021-2022, 64 percent of our students opted to take Sixth Grade Pre-Algebra, which is based on a mix of state learning standards for the sixth and seventh grades. This school year, 53 percent of our sixth graders are taking Sixth Grade Pre Algebra. However, not all of the standards are covered for either the sixth or seventh grade. The result is they lack foundational skills they would need to use in high school Algebra classes.

The Superintendent and his administration have been consulting with stakeholders about these issues as early as last December. At that time, our High School STEM Supervisor surveyed high school math teachers. In that survey, the teachers indicated that students who took math in middle school were not building the skills they needed to enter ninth grade at Algebra 2.

During the past year, meetings have been held among math teachers in middle school and high school to make sure their courses are better aligned.

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In response to this, our high school and K to 8 STEM supervisors held a meeting in March with eight middle school math teachers and 10 high school math teachers to talk about how to improve the teaching of middle school math so that standards are more effectively covered.

These conversations with teachers continued over the summer, and during September and October as well. As a result, they were part of the decision to make sixth-grade math for all. We heard their concerns. Their feedback was a large part of why the District proposed at the Oct. 30th meeting to have a "Sixth-Grade Math For All" approach to math instruction, which would begin in the 2024-2025 school year. Meaning, all sixth-graders would take the same math level because it provides the foundational skills all students need to succeed in middle school and high school math. There have additional conversations with math supervisors, principals, and math interventionists. A second survey of teachers is currently underway.

*Allegation: Fabricating a confrontational relationship between labor and management, most recently evidenced at the October 18th BOE meeting when contrary to Dr. Taylor's assertions without names or dates that math teachers were consulted about de-leveling, multiple middle and high school teachers affirmed during public speaks that their departments were never consulted about de-leveling and CHS had in fact attempted a de-leveled Discrete Math class with negative outcomes compared to both College Prep and Honors sections of the course, so they would never advocate for the same, only for Dr. Taylor to subsequently decry publicly he doubted the veracity of their statements.*

**District Response:** The confrontation that exists between SOMEA's leadership and the administration is no fabrication. It's real and it has two sides. While Dr. Taylor and his administration are always willing to work toward resolving conflicts, they cannot allow anyone to spread misinformation without setting the record straight. Numerous meetings have been held with math teachers about how to address the inequities in math preparedness among our students. These inequities are very apparent when our students reach high school. One teacher publicly claimed that a single class's attempt to de-level was a failure as if it was the harbinger of what was to come if the Access and Equity Resolution's first reading was approved. However, the District's intent was to implement the reframing of math courses, which would take place over a projected 5-year period and only after a robust professional development program to support teachers. A presentation to the Board of Education on October 30<sup>th</sup> showed the plan for 2024-2025 was to only create the "Sixth-Grade Math For All" class. The next school year would be the perfect time to do this as the District will be abiding by the State's new math standards and the District is currently researching new math textbooks. Meanwhile, any "failures" in the implementation of "Sixth-Grade Math For All" could be addressed so that the program would improve. At this time, we are at a standstill. Nothing is happening and the inequities among our students will continue.

### Transportation

*Allegation: Choosing to outsource transportation within the District despite a long-standing and successful practice of providing in-house transportation, thereby cultivating personal relationships between District employees and*

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*students, only now to have students missing material parts of the school day due to repeated late arrivals as a result of convoluted bus routes and late or lost bus drivers, only now to have our younger students experience anxiety and humiliation at having had bathroom accidents due to prolonged bus routes where they could no longer hold their pressing need to empty their bladders.*

**District Response:** The District outsourced its school transportation to offset some of its increases in labor costs. But before this, approximately 80 percent of the District's students who rode buses during the aforementioned time utilized a transportation company that was a District subcontractor. In other words, most of the District's school bus transportation had already been outsourced. Also, Hurricane Ida destroyed much of the District's school bus fleet, and many District school buses were robbed of their catalytic converters. Those challenges made this transition a prudent fiscal and operational decision for the remaining services.

SOMEA's leadership was entitled to a seat at the table to negotiate the impact on its members as the District worked toward subcontracting bus companies for the remaining 20 percent of its routes. However, SOMEA decided to protest the decision in public meetings and by appealing to the New Jersey Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC), claiming that the District and the Board of Education failed to negotiate the impact of subcontracting school transportation. By making this decision, SOMEA's leadership waived their right to negotiate subcontracting for the remainder of the collective bargaining agreement, which ends in 2024. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, PERC ruled against SOMEA's claim. Furthermore, PERC's decision said that SOMEA intentionally did not negotiate for the Transportation Department when it reached the 2021-2024 collective bargaining agreement.

#### Empty Bottles On A Bus

*Allegation: Exposing students to empty liquor bottles when these third-party buses were not cleaned prior to retrieving students.*

**District Response:** This was an isolated incident that was the result of the bus company not checking a bus for cleanliness after it had been used for a private event the night before a school day. As embarrassing as this incident was, it was in no way a symptom of a failing district administration. It has not happened again.

#### Segregation

*Allegation: Implementing an integration plan whose intended effect was to create greater equity between students in the lower socio-economic stratum with those in middle and upper strata, except Dr. Taylor's plan has had a negative impact on the students the plan was meant to help, as evidenced by the disproportionate number of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch being made to travel outside of their neighborhood at greater distances and times to attend school as well as failing to provide the necessary academic support services these vulnerable students need at their assigned schools.*

**District Response:** This is a very strong and unsubstantiated allegation. To blame the ills of racial housing patterns and the effects of neighborhood schools on any one person is illogical, foolish, and incredibly unfair. We know that there is much work to be done in battling the impact of many, many years of racial segregation. There are areas where our District has made progress, according to the students and families who responded to our most recent Experience Survey. More families said that the staff at their children's school understood their children's culture and background (89 percent, up from 63 percent in the previous survey). More families said that the administration at their child's school understands their child's culture and background (88 percent, up from 55 percent in the previous survey). Students who responded to the survey indicated that it was difficult for them to be accepted at their school and that tensions existed among students from different backgrounds and identities. We are committed to making progress in this area and believe that organizations such as the Minority Achievement Committee (MAC) can be helpful in that regard.

### Special Education

*Allegation: Failing to remedy the lack of several special education teachers in classrooms across the District where students are entitled and the District is legally required to furnish a certified special education teacher despite knowing that special education was deficient in numbers at the end of last year to cover the current special education population and even though they were testing several additional students over the summer who would likely need special education services for the school year.*

**District Response:** Unfortunately, the vast majority of public school districts in New Jersey are guilty of not having enough teachers and resources for their special education students. Our District has been fighting the good fight to attract competent and caring educators into our open positions. The reality is that the number of college graduates going into education has dropped precipitously during the past 20 years. That forces many districts to use options such as working with agencies to fill immediate educational needs.

### Getting Paid For Extra Work

*Allegation: Neglecting to pay teachers for additional hours worked, in some cases for months despite the fact that the administration was aware beginning at the start of the school year that these teachers would cover additional classes over their regular workload as the District was unable to hire or retain necessary teachers.*

**District Response:** The District wants employees to be paid for all of the work that they do for the District or their school. If an employee is owed payment for doing extra work, that employee should always feel free to contact the administration. We will check, and we have checked, to make sure the proper timesheets have been completed and that the employee's supervisor, Payroll Department, and Human Resources Department have all given their verifications. If any part of the process is incomplete, we will do everything we can to assist the employee in making sure the proper process is followed. We do have a very small Payroll Department and would be open to expanding this department in the future through our budget process.



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### Negotiating Salaries Of New Teachers

*Allegation: Authorizing the hiring of new teachers in direct violation of the terms of the District's Collective Bargaining Agreement with SOMEA, in many cases at salaries well in excess of what is being paid to the long-term teachers of the District who already felt overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated by the District.*

**District Response:** As this is a matter of a pending grievance, the District will maintain confidentiality notwithstanding the SOMEA leadership's waiver.

### Teachers Leaving the District

*Allegation: Losing hundreds of teachers who have left the District in growing dissatisfaction with the day-to-day management and policies under Dr. Taylor's regime, pursuing positions in higher-paying districts where they feel recognized and appreciated.*

**District Response:** This is not just a South Orange-Maplewood problem. The huge number of people leaving the teaching profession is a widely reported national crisis. It stems from the decades-old crisis of people not entering the teaching profession in the first place. The number of people entering the profession has been steadily declining for at least the past 20 years. This is, of course, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted many other industries.

In September 2022, the Pew Research Center reported that from 2000-2001 to 2019-2020, the number of bachelor's degrees in education fell 19 percent (from 105,000 to 85,057). Meanwhile, the number of total bachelor's degrees rose from 1.3M to more than 2 million during the same 20-year time period.

In March 2022, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education reported that between the 2008-2009 and the 2018-2019 academic years, the number of people completing a teacher-education program declined by almost a third.

### Freshman Academy

*Allegation: Promising stakeholders last spring a five-day CHS Freshman Academy to address the achievement gap and the ever-increasing needs of students for social-emotional learning and executive function skills, only not to collaborate with SOMEA regarding the assignment of staff to this Academy until after school started this fall, only not to furnish any curriculum for said Academy to this day despite his administration assuring SOMEA in writing that the BOE had approved a curriculum for the Academy, and now taking the position that a curriculum is not needed to instruct students.*

**District Response:** The Freshman Academy is not a course. It does not have a curriculum, nor should it. Students do not have assessments and they do not receive grades. It does not have state learning standards with which to align.

The Freshman Academy is a program that our ninth-graders are required to attend two days a week.

Prior to school starting in September, the District and CHS originally planned for the Freshman Academy's informal discussion sessions, known as "huddles" to meet five days a week. It was later decided to have the huddles meet two days a week to allow the freshmen to have opportunities to meet with their teachers for academic support, when they need to, on any of the three other days.

The purpose of the Freshman Academy is to support the transition from middle school to high school. The Freshman Academy aimed at helping students build strong relationships with each other, develop communication and social skills, and make connections with trusted adults for their journey through the next four years at Columbia High School.

The Freshman Academy program is meant to be an open and responsive process, leaning into the needs of supporting our freshman.

These activities started as soon as freshmen were assigned to classes.

Among the activities that have happen so far are:

- CHS administrators, counselors, and class advisors introduced themselves to the freshmen
- "Huddle Reps," gave out IDs and other necessary items needed at CHS,
- School staff reviewed community agreements and the Code of Conduct with the students
- Icebreaker exercises were held to all students to get to know one another.
- Freshmen learned what academic supports are available
- Class credit system was explained to the freshmen
- An Extra-Curricular Activities Fair was held.

Huddle activities have been planned through the end of December. At that point, the Huddles' focus will move to Casel Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies. We hear the concerns of our students, their families, and our teachers. We are working on restructuring the huddles. We're looking forward to building even more community building into the huddle structure in the coming months.

### A Decline In Academic Rigor?

*Allegation: Further aiding and abetting the decline of rigor in contradiction to the specific recommendations of Dr. Fergus by reducing the final average a student needs to receive academic credit for a course to .50 despite a D- being the quarterly equivalent of a .67, lying to the public and our students about their college and career readiness.*

**District Response:** The SOMEA leadership's dissatisfaction with a grade floor is well-known to be among a limited few. In practice and based upon scholarly review and data-driven analyses including "The Arguments and Data in Favor of Minimum Grading" and "Do Minimum Grading Practices Lower

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Academic Standards and Produce Social Promotions?” by James Carifio and Theodore Carey, **there is no evidence of grade inflation or social promotion** to support assertions that minimum grade policies lower expectation and lower achievement motivation for students.

### Facilities & Grounds

*Allegation: Encouraging a laissez-faire approach to maintaining and fixing our facilities and grounds by disregarding repeated and ongoing notifications of infested and leaking and broken facilities so that staff and students alike have gone home with their property and body crawling with insects and having developed physical symptoms in response to poor physical environments, evidencing how inept Dr. Taylor is at supervising Grounds and Facilities, failing to hold them accountable in performing their operational duties, perpetuating ongoing health and safety violations throughout our grounds and buildings.*

**District Response:** As of this writing, there have been no health and safety violations found by New Jersey’s Public Employees Occupational Safety and Health (PEOSH) agency. It is important to highlight that the District has seen more than \$100 million of the \$155 million funds approved through a referendum invested in facilities improvements under the Superintendent and his administration. The oversight of the District’s 11 aging facilities has received more focus through capital improvement, deep cleaning during the pandemic, and human capital investment than at any time before Dr. Taylor's arrival. In addition to the bond construction monies, since December 1, 2021, the District has obtained nearly \$2 million in special services in the areas of heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC), plumbing, pest management, and roofing repairs.

### Workspaces

*Allegation: Neglecting to notify teachers of the need to move their carefully created and valuable classroom resources, only to have those teachers return from summer break and realize they are without the resources they need to teach students because they have been haphazardly thrown in boxes, misplaced, or broken.*

In all cases, we would rather give our teachers and staff members the courtesy of advance notice when work needs to be done in their workspaces. Sometimes, we have emergent situations and we simply cannot take those steps to provide that courtesy. Situations like these are not the norm and we rely on the good of our colleagues to understand that our priority must be to provide the safest and cleanest facilities possible where people can learn and work.