August 10. 2020

Dear Howell School Board Members,

I write to you as you are just ending your Board meeting tonight. I spoke to you as a retired HPS teacher tonight, as a parent of a HPS teacher, and as a grandmother of two HPS students. I was not able to speak to all of the points that I had planned – due to the time constraints. Normally, I would not feel compelled to write after addressing you in person, but after watching the speakers tonight, I feel that it is so important for me to share my concerns and disappointment.

First of all, as one teacher clearly pointed out, the case rate per 100,000 people in the two Howell zip codes is very closely aligned with that of the Georgia county that just had to close schools due to over 200 people, students and staff, either getting COVID-19, or having to quarantine due to exposure. I am wondering if you have a plan for when – not a matter of if – COVID strikes in an HPS school. First of all, students will have fear/guilt of getting sick or of having transmitted the virus – to a friend or a teacher. Then there is the fact that school will likely be closed for a period of time. How much instructional time will be lost while teachers get prepared for remote learning? One former colleague of mine thanked you for allowing him to begin teaching his students how to access remote learning. Is that how you want the school year to start? How will you adjust to the fact that fewer kids will be returning to HPS – how will you accommodate those increased numbers of remote learners once brick and mortar is back in session? I feel like you do not have that plan in place – drowning while flailing…

I was taken aback by the parents who said they will be using the virtual learning option for their children and the inadequacy of the course offerings for high school students. Is this not discrimination to not provide ALL students with the same educational opportunities? How can you not offer the AP classes online? Are you not prepared for that? Moving the start date might give you more time…

I recognize that some teachers thanked you for your hard work in getting the school year set – I worked with most of them during my tenure with HPS. They were right to thank you for your time – but not the results. If you have followed the news – you know that the case count for the country has doubled in the past two weeks. And this is before school is in session for much of the country. John Palo had it right when he said that no business would ask its staff to work in a conference room with no masks – which is exactly what you are asking of MY grandchildren. Doctors have an oath that says Do No Harm. If there were a teacher oath – I am sure it would be Keep All Students Safe. How in the world do you expect that to happen with the current start date, lack of training on PPE, social distancing, no masks in K-5?? Are you prepared to endure lawsuits which will occur when students and staff contract COVID-19? Do you want the story of your tenure with HPS to be the Board that put children and staff in harm’s way by forcing a quick return to school? You should want it to be a good story – the story of how HPS led the way to keeping all students safe and waited to get their District completely up and running by planning all the avenues to a safe school environment. Leading your clientele by your mission statement – Empowering students to be better citizens – how can that be true if you are not keeping them safe…

Lastly, how can you even put the concept of wearing masks at the elementary level on the teachers? Are you afraid to take that responsibility into your own hands?? Teachers have enough to handle with students, parents, and the curriculum without the mask issue. Science has proven that masks cut the risk of infection – and there is currently a lot of evidence to show that younger children carry a high load of virus. If you want these kids in the school, mandate mask usage without making teachers the deliverer. If you don’t – they will not be in school, masks or not because they will have infected others and you will have to close.

I know how a classroom works, how a teacher best delivers instruction, the message of care and safety. I now know that none of you understand this – and I am guessing that most of you do not have children in school to worry about what effects this decision to have brick and mortar, a start date of August 19, and no masks for younger students will have. I am hoping that you have good lawyers to handle the cases you will be dealing with as students and staff become sick with the virus. And I have not even mentioned the state of the schools…

Your schools are not physically ready to open next week – you could have easily shared that with the HPS families. With a global pandemic, they probably would understand pushing school back to September 8 due to construction issues. Maybe the press and the Governor should be made aware…

At the end of this very long day, which I spent most of in Ann Arbor while my husband got his chemotherapy, I realize that I care so much more about my daughter, grandchildren and former colleagues and students than you do. I am not sure that you are all up to the task that you have been given – to do no harm and keep each child safe.

Sheila Linhart