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Subject: Urgent Concerns from Phase 2 Arts Educators

Thursday, October 22, 2020

Superintendent Gothard and Members of the Board of Education:

We, the K-5 Arts Teachers who are being asked to return to our buildings for Phase 2 Hybrid Learning, are writing to share some of our concerns and questions regarding this potential move to Hybrid Learning in November.

Foremost, we are writing to share a collective voice that we feel is often an undervalued voice in SPPS. We are regarded as “prep” teachers by our colleagues and most recently in the District’s Hybrid plan. One Arts Teacher shared that their principal told them they had to come back ‘because the other teachers needed prep’ and the hybrid “plan” mirrors that attitude. We, however, are not just prep teachers. We are Arts Specialists that are integral to the development and learning of our students. We have relationships with all students in a school and impact them immensely. Our relationships with our students don’t start and end with each school year. We are each child’s teacher throughout their elementary education. Many children started this year with a teacher who they still have not met face to face - yet they know us; we are a familiar, constant source of support that will always be there year after year. This is one of the most amazing gifts of being an Elementary Arts Specialist but there are also unique challenges that become dangerous during a pandemic.

In the Hybrid plan, Elementary Specialists would be put in a position where, over the course of a month, we would be exposed to and in close contact with ALL students and staff. The risk of exposure and infection is exponentially greater for us than for other teachers. Our job would be dangerous, for ourselves and for others. This is not addressed or planned for adequately in the Hybrid plan. We are scared for our lives and safety as well as the lives and safety of our students and families. How will you keep us ALL safe?

Specialists who would be going back in Phase 2 Hybrid Learning are in another unique position. We not only teach and respond to hundreds of students online, but we are doing so on two platforms: SeeSaw and Schoology. If we return to Hybrid, not only would we be teaching in two platforms but we would also be teaching in three models: Hybrid PreK-2, Distance 3-5, and the Virtual Learning School. This is NOT equitable or sustainable compared to a classroom teacher’s workload. We are concerned that we

will not have Fridays as prep days like PreK-2 classroom teachers. This is because we will still have to teach Distance Learning to Grades 3-5. As explained above, with the many models and platforms that we are using we will have so much more planning to do for those different models.

Right now, you have a group of talented and caring teachers providing invaluable Arts Education to our students. We have pulled together to share resources and, as a learning community, have helped each other to provide consistent and rigorous Arts Education in Distance Learning 2.0. According to the resolution adopted by the Board of Education and emailed to teachers on Wednesday morning, the Board “seeks to retain its employees, reduce turnover, increase morale, help employees focus on work-related matters while at work...” In order for our minds to be in our classrooms where we want them to be, with our students and when it is safe, we need these concerns to be addressed and have included them in this email for your immediate attention. These concerns and questions are valid and need to be answered BEFORE a decision is made about returning to school. Our lives, our families lives and the lives of our students and their families depend on it.

Regardless of the fact that based on current data it is not safe to return to in-person school, the Hybrid plan does not allow for equitable, safe, and consistent Arts Education as illustrated in the concerns and questions listed below. This brings us back to an important question, are you bringing us back to give better, more supported Arts Education, or are you bringing us back to give other teachers prep time?

With the items in our list left unaddressed and children stuck at desks without the kind of creative freedom to move their bodies, raise their voices, and fully immerse themselves in using the materials that they know, love, and share, we fear that our students’ experiences in the Arts will suffer. Our students, and the Art Educators who love them, deserve better. We need answers and a clear, trustworthy plan for how we will all be kept safe in a Hybrid scenario during this global pandemic.

Signed:
SPPS Phase 2 Arts Educators

Lindsay Walker, K-5 Art Teacher, Benjamin E. Mays IB World School

Seth Stratton, Prek-5 Art Teacher, Highland Park Elementary School

Terri Colamatteo, PreK-5, Cherokee Heights Elementary

Jennifer Erickson, K-5 Music Specialist, L’Etoile du Nord French Immersion Schools, Lower (K-1) AND upper (2-5) campuses.

Monique Payan, K-5 Art Teacher, Adams Spanish Immersion Elementary

Sara Mergens PreK-5 Art Teacher, JJ Hill Montessori

Jeff Fulton, Instrumental Music, Capitol Hill Gifted and Talented

Lisa Parins Art, Obama Elementary

Amanda M. Driesen, Pre-k-5 Drama Specialist, Mississippi Creative Arts Elementary

Corinne Schuster, K-5 Art Teacher, Maxfield Elementary

Kent Sall, k-5 Art Teacher, Eastern Heights Elementary

Marni Oberpriller, PreK-5 Art Teacher, Crossroads Montessori Elementary and Crossroads Science Elementary

Kristy Rolig, k-5 Art Teacher, Four Seasons A+ Elementary

Deborah Karp-Castrenze, PreK - 5 Dance Teacher, Mississippi Creative Arts

Ahna Brandvik Logan, K-5 Theater Specialist, Four Seasons A+ Elementary School

Jenna J. Haug, 1-6 Visual Art Teacher, Capitol Hill Gifted and Talented

Elisabeth Wright, K-4 Visual Arts Teacher, Global Arts Plus

Sidney Pudwill, K-5 Dance Specialist, Four Seasons A+ Elementary School

Meghan Karschnia, PreK-5 Visual Art Teacher, Mississippi Creative Arts Elementary

Mackenzie Henson, K-5 Music Specialist, Adams Spanish Immersion Elementary

Lisa Gatzke, K-5 Visual Art Specialist, Como Park Elementary

Dani Friedman Block, 5-8 Dance Specialist, Global Arts Plus, Upper Campus

Kim Kroetsch, K-4 Music Specialist, Global Arts Plus Lower Campus

Leonard Madsen, preK-5 Music specialist, J. J. Hill Montessori

Danielle Hartle k-5 art specialist Chelsea Heights Elementary

Theresa J. Westcott, Pre-K-5 Music Specialist, Frost Lake Elementary

Michelle Edlund, k-5 music specialist, Four Seasons A+

Debra Elias, K-4 Dance and Theatre Specialist, Global Arts Plus Lowertown Campus

Questions and Concerns from Stage II Hybrid Arts Educators:

On a Cart: Extra Exposure to/Ability to Transfer Illness

How will specialists be protected or compensated from/for the fact that we will be the staff that are most exposed in Hybrid learning? Specialists will be exposed to all students and therefore families in our schools during the week. It won't matter that we are in classrooms for 50 minutes because it only takes 15 min or less of exposure to become infected.

Are specialists able to wear protective suits in combination with masks/face shields/goggles to protect themselves from being exposed to the most students and staff in the building?

Will extra PPE be provided to those who are exposed to ALL students in the building like Specialists?

Is there going to be language put into the MOA to talk about specialists being on a cart and going into each classroom? What precautions will be taken to keep us safe?

The district provides 10 days to each teacher for Covid. Elementary specialists would be exposed repeatedly, so 10 days is not equitable considering the amount of exposure.

How is the district keeping us safe when we see multiple classes/kids per day?

As a specialist, I see ALL students and interact with ALL teachers. We have 542 students. What measure does the district plan to take, beyond simple PPE, air filtration and social distancing, to protect students and their families, teachers and myself to prevent further spread? The head of MDH spoke on Monday saying that COVID transmission is now primarily through small and medium sized group gatherings. Hybrid will be a perfect place for virus transmission. How will this be prevented since specialists will interact with everyone?

I want to know when there is a positive student in a class what happens- does that class shut down, am I expected to continue to be a super spreader going into that space?

Arts specialists, the students they serve, their families and school staff are being put at particularly high risk by requiring arts specialists to move from classroom to classroom throughout the course of a teaching day to provide "prep" for other teachers. When the arts are given the level of importance that they deserve in the education of the whole child, it is the content and

learners that are most important. There must be safer ways to provide “prep” coverage for educators.

I would be in contact with hundreds of kids, which is something the CDC has continuously recommended to not do.

The Arts on a Cart: Other Challenges & Ideas for Moving Forward

I taught on a cart during our building's construction period and it was very difficult. Not only moving things from one room to the next, but also having to teach in the homeroom teacher's spaces. It found it harder to establish my rituals and routines in classrooms where kids were allowed to be disruptive with their homeroom teachers. I can set the tone much better in my space. Also, it takes 5-10 minutes to move between rooms, and I had to deal with already annoyed homeroom teachers who lost precious prep minutes while I was traveling between rooms. Finally, some homeroom teachers were resistant to leave the space, so I dealt with stapling and other distracting things while teaching. A few even reprimanded students and called them over to them to finish work while I was teaching.

I would be warmer to the idea of hybrid learning if I were in my own classroom. I know that music teachers in other Twin Cities metro districts can teach in their rooms. I have read a lot of articles about COVID and schools, and I have not heard of any COVID outbreaks in a specialist space. I know SPPS agreed to allow PE to teach in their space, so I am confused why music, science, etc. cannot. If we could be in our own rooms, homeroom teachers would be able to use their prep time to organize learning activities in their own rooms, instead of seeking out a table to work at during their prep.

If the union is looking to shorten the work day by 1 hour for teachers in hybrid, an easy way to do that would be to have specialists continue distance learning. If students did not have specialists during the school day during hybrid learning, they would simply leave the school 50 minutes earlier. Plus, I can do more of my curriculum via distance learning since students can safely sing and play recorders at home.

If students are being brought back in the future for hybrid learning, a siloed/cohort approach should be considered through which 2-3 adults support one elementary classroom. In doing so, the adults in each classroom can support the social, emotional, and academic needs of the students and the prep needs of one another. Arts specialists would continue to provide instruction from home for all classes of students safely while the students are supervised by a member of the classroom teaching cohort.

Transitioning Between Classrooms

Are specialists travelling to different classrooms, or would we teach in our own spaces?

How much time would we have between classes to disinfect ourselves before seeing the next group?

How do we clean the carts after we have brought them into a room and before we bring them into another room?

What amount of passing time will be provided in between our classes so that we can physically transition, sanitize our carts and supplies, and sanitize ourselves before entering a new space? Handwashing upon leaving and entering a space will take 2 minutes per space. How will we ensure that this transition time remains intact when Stage 3 groups return to school as well and the number of our physical transitions doubles?

Are the rooms going to be cleaned before we go into them?

Can we wear scrubs or other coverings that can be switched out in between classes?

Consistency for Our Students

I'm concerned about how this throws a wrench in all that we've created distance learning wise and expect our students to adapt to the ebb and flow of hybrid and distance learning depending on the growth of this pandemic the next few months during winter.

Educators have completely reinvented how we teach for distance learning. We have finally established the rituals and routines necessary for academic success in distance learning. A transition to hybrid negates all of the work of the first 6+ weeks of school and requires us to repeat the first 6 weeks of establishing new rituals and routines for hybrid. This will lead to a significant loss of academic time.

Sub Concerns

With the inevitability of poorly planned subbing/sub shortages/teachers getting sick/teacher death will specialists be protected from being the perpetual "fill-in" or "sub" for those situations?

How can we have reliable sub plans if we are responsible for 3 different learning models (hybrid, DL, and VL)?

If both the classroom teacher and the specialist teachers are exposed and need to quarantine, do we have enough subs for this?

Will subs be trained in both SeeSaw and Schoology? Specialists at the elementary level use both platforms to teach--another example of the inequity of this situation.

What will happen in the event that we have no guest teacher coverage for classrooms where the teacher is out for illness or other? -Will the kids be split between other classes where we would see classes that are larger than the 50% capacity maximum?

(Keeping in mind that some classroom spaces are larger than others and may be "at capacity" well below the 50% mark). Splitting classes and redistributing the kids was normal practice in our building pre-covid but now would put our classes over the capacity that has been deemed "safe."

If we are ordered to quarantine due to a Covid outbreak in some classroom that we have been exposed to, who will prepare the sub plans for all of the classes I would see for the ~14 days that we will be gone?

Will I be moved to another position if there are teachers needed in classrooms?

If I am 'art on a cart,' as suggested by my principal, who will sub for me when I am exposed to COVID and expected to quarantine?

What if the building sub is ill, or there is no other sub available, will I be shifted into another role -ie, covering for a classroom teacher?

Quarantine & Health Safety Protocol

We need a specific directive from the district on how and when classrooms will quarantine when someone in that room is sick and tests positive for Covid. It shouldn't have to be up to each building or Principal. So far, I have not seen anything in writing on this.

If someone goes home sick, will the district require that those students/staff get tested and are Covid free before they return? I'm sure the nurses have a general policy in place for serious illness. However, with Covid, there should be a specific plan in place before we begin hybrid teaching in November.

If a case breaks out in any classroom they have had exposure to, do the specialists have to quarantine?

If I see 5 - 6 classes a day, and have to quarantine, does that mean ALL of those students and teachers will also quarantine? What about the TAs and EAs that I have come into contact with? Or - basically everyone in the building....?

Safety Protocols from PreK - 5

I am worried about the PPE being enough or working well enough with the littlest students ~ and them being able to follow guidelines and rules at 5 years old.

Scheduling

Fridays are prep days in Hybrid. Specialists won't get that Friday, because they are teaching 3-5 distance which is a contact day for specialists. Are we going to be compensated for that?

Will specialists need to be in the building the whole day, every day even if there are no hybrid classes for part of the day/schedule?

With back-to-back sessions and no built-in transition time, aside from lunch, when do specialists use the restroom?

The planned hybrid schedule, as-is, is not equitable. If a hybrid schedule is carried out as written, due to short weeks in the calendar, group A will be in school 12 days prior to Winter Break and group B will only have 8 days in school prior to winter break. How are we going to address this inequity?

How will conferences go for specialists?

Curriculum & Learning

What is the district's view of continuity of learning if students are in hybrid learning? How can the material be covered when we are going back and forth?

What do we have in place for when a child forgets to bring their iPad to school on any given day? If they are using iPads for most things and sharing isn't an option, how will SPPS make sure this wouldn't be a completely lost day of learning for children whose iPads are at home?

Has anyone at the District talked to specialists to learn how they conduct a class?

Equitable and Safe Access to Materials for Visual Art Making

As artists, we know materials are important to what we do and believe. Is there ANY way to use a variety of materials safely and without cross-contamination?

How can materials be managed between classes, on a cart, and home. This is a whole job in itself outside of teaching the classes.

What materials will my kids get so they don't have to share them?

Would students be using materials, or would lessons take place through SeeSaw and Schoology?

Will all student work have to be created using student devices only?

Who is responsible for creating art kits for students if they cannot share materials?

Who is responsible for paying for those extra materials?

If we pass out paper for an assignment, can we collect it to bring it back to our classroom or do we look at the artwork and let the students keep them?

Will there be space in the classrooms to store the artwork the students are working on or can we only do projects that take one day to complete?

Workload Concerns

How will we teach hybrid prek-2 and distance 3-5 at the same time? (I have gotten the unsatisfactory answer that you will teach distance grades during their prep while you are teaching hybrid. What about all the students who can't/don't do their specialist work during that time? Do I ignore them? Do I work through the night trying to respond to them?)

Specialists teach all grades at the primary level. Our workload is stressed as it is, and teaching in three different models on two different platforms. Will we be getting extra planning time for this?

Will specialists be responsible for Hybrid, Distance, and Virtual Learning school? If so, how will we be compensated?

Simultaneously teaching online and in person. I'm already stretched thin as it is...

As I teach k-1 at one building and 2-5 at another. Not only do I teach on the cart going into the classrooms, I must travel then wait for the afternoon to teach one 2nd grade class Monday to Thursday when will I have planning time and grading for hybrid and my 3-5 full week DL. Then k-5 DL Friday? Why are the specialists having this extra workload- is it fair? If you're a first-grade teacher, you only need to worry about the students in your own class. Specialists see all kids- on rotation and hybrid and 3-5 distant.

I am concerned about teaching stage 2 hybrid and distance teaching my 3-5th graders- how will this schedule work? will we be compensated? will there be time in the daily and weekly schedule to create new curriculum for both models? on both platforms? (schoolology and seesaw)

What are the expectations re: teaching in Level 2? Are we expected to create separate lessons for F2F, Hybrid AND distance learning? That is 3 distinct jobs. If we are asked to do these three jobs, will I be compensated for that?

I am worried about managing the workload of Hybrid, DL and VL and multiple platforms. How will we have enough time to prepare for all of this?

How will I ever find the time to teach in person and find the extra 32 hours I now have to focus on distance learning for the other cohort of k-2 and the 3-5? Does the district expect us to lower our standards of teaching just to make this work? If not where are we supposed to find an extra 32 hours a week?

As a PreK - 5th specialist, I use two different DL platforms, Seesaw and Schoology. How will the district plan to provide AMPLE time to deliver in person lessons, DL lessons, planning across multiple platforms and grading/responses for multiple platforms under the hybrid model?

Arts Educators' Family Concerns

What am I supposed to do with my own kids? Essential kids care sites are full from what I hear, it is hard to find care on short notice.

My biggest concern is the amount of exposure my family will have. We won't be just seeing 10 students, but multiple classrooms. My spouse is a teacher and we have two elementary aged children. Our family will be exposed to hundreds of people in a week!

Childcare for my children who are in 2nd and 3 years old. The changes between stage 2/3, potential closings for covid outbreaks- I am very anxious there won't be enough time to find anyone to watch my kids on short notice when all the nannies and daycares are doing pods or full.

As a parent of students I want to know what their day will look like and give them an understanding before they show up the first day.

Building Safety

Arts teachers will be pushing into classroom teachers' spaces where the teacher may or may not choose to stay during their students' art classes (it's their prep so, even though I don't know where they will go, they do not have to stay). I have read in the Administrator's Handbook that "State mandated Fire/Lockdown/Lockout drills will continue to be required during COVID-19." How is it possible to safely conduct these drills while maintaining social distance? Is it necessary or appropriate during this time? These drills are traumatizing enough to our students in NORMAL school times.

I have a key to my art classroom and the staff bathroom. Will I be given a master key to the building? If there was some kind of emergency in the building and we had to do a lockdown, I would not be able to lock the doors of whichever classroom I am teaching in, nor would there be time to find someone to run around and lock all the doors for me and all the specialists who are sprinkled in classrooms all over the building and in the same situation.

Facilities

Are all buildings safe? The video of the COVID safety protocols at Adams School was great, a new building with many updates, but I work in a very old building with very little updates. I am concerned about going to multiple classrooms in a day in a poorly ventilated building/rooms.

Performing Arts Concerns

The Minnesota State High School League has suggested that students in theater rehearse 12 feet apart. In elementary theater, we are on stage (in normal times) every day, sometimes 3-4 students on a 12 foot stage. Currently, that is not an option. How do I teach a performance art where we can actually move our bodies and use our voices together?

If students are expected to stay in their classroom and at their desks - they will not be the recommended 12 feet apart. Therefore, we will continue learning on our iPads. Is this the expectation?

If students DO come into the theater room, how much time between classes will I be allowed in order to effectively clean and sanitize my space?

I'm concerned about what my administration will say is "safe" for students to do, or what I will be required to do in my drama curriculum that I feel might not be the safest to engage students in doing?

I'm concerned about having children being able to move safely in their classroom. In the dance studio there is far more room to social distance than in their classroom.

Sanitization

We will be teaching throughout the building and exposed to all cleaning products used throughout. Will bleach still be used throughout the building, in addition to our new product, Oxivir? What other cleaning products will be used regularly throughout the building? Can we see all labels for the products that will be used; warning labels "no contact with skin," "do not use if pregnant," "use in well ventilated areas..." With zero windows in our building (and many buildings) that open, "well ventilated" areas don't really exist in our schools.

Vocal and Instrumental Music Concerns

What will be the district's decision on singing in person? As an elementary music teacher our class is not meaningful or fun if we can not sing and doing distance learning we can.

My students also currently have music bags at home with individual instruments in them. Will I have to create another set of bags for in-person learning? Where will that funding come from? Will the district supply more funds to get more instruments for in class use?

If we can't sing and we can't play instruments because my school doesn't have 1 for every kid what is the point of doing music class in person? Am I just a prep break for teachers at this point?

Fortunately, SPPS has made a very wise investment in the Quaver Music Curriculum. Through Quaver, elementary music students in SPPS have continued their music learning from home in a safe, individualized, culturally relevant and engaging manner. Quaver allows music educators to safely teach and students to safely learn in this era of COVID.

My students sing and dance and stretch their bodies and do creative movement and play recorder in their Distance Learning lessons that I curate to meet their needs. I am a music teacher using the Quaver Music curriculum the district recently invested in. It is an amazing learning tool to be able to use during Distance Learning, and when used in conjunction with SeeSaw, I am able to stay connected with my students and offer quality feedback. Although my lessons have drastically changed to adjust to teaching from a distance, I have found tons of ways to engage students in fun, active, creative, and musical ways-- to give them meaningful opportunities for joyful, educational play during the pandemic.

However, when students do their music lessons at school they won't be able to do any of those things listed above. Instead their little bodies will be STUCK in one place listening to the teacher, watching videos, and doing interactive activities on their ipad in an effort to maintain social distancing.

Even with the added risks from moving from room to room, we are still limited in what we can do as music teachers (not being able to share instruments or sing together, for example). If we are required to teach in a hybrid setting, it makes more sense to me to be able to teach from my own classroom and not move from room to room on a cart. Classes could either come to the music room, or I could teach remotely from the music room or from my home. Since the district is considering ending school an hour earlier, it would make the most sense to have specialists continue distance learning from home until there is a vaccine, or until it is safe to return to full-time, in-person instruction.

With moving from classroom to classroom... Using the supplies that I have will take more than one trip. So that brings the question of leaving materials in the classrooms themselves to use each day... Would that be alright with classroom teachers? Especially if the instruments are big/fragile... I don't want the students touching them/playing them when I am not around.

What will and will not students be able to do in music class? Are we allowing them to sing, play instruments, etc?

On Our Hearts and Minds

We are the continuing thread of support for our students. They have never met their new teachers unless possibly in Montessori. We are the teachers they know. We are the people that need to be leaned into rather than written off simply as "prep" during DL and hybrid.

I am worried about seeing a student or colleague get sick and end up in the hospital. One student or One colleague is TOO many to lose.

I am also greatly concerned about specialist teachers becoming "super spreaders" because most of us work with every student in our respective schools.

Distance learning is going well for my students. I am concerned about going back into hybrid, but I also know that I would be able to connect with my students in a more holistic way if we were face-to-face.

I'm concerned for my own family, as I will be the one being exposed more so often than the rest of them.

I'm mostly worried about being told to be "adaptable" and then being left in the dark.

I work in a building where I have many students who live in multigenerational families and most of my students are children of color. We know that elderly people are at high risk and that communities of color have been disproportionately impacted by Covid. The risks are deadly. I am terrified that, because I will be exposed to everyone in the building (and therefore everyone's family), I am going to unknowingly spread this virus and it is going to make someone sick or worse.

I want to go back to teaching. However, I also want to know the protocols for dealing with Covid so that we can keep our students and staff safe.

It is outrageous that we are considering opening before holidays where the spread of covid is a given.

I have multiple respiratory medical issues and had covid already and now have continued ailments. Dr addressed them and now this morning they send another form for him to certify I have the conditions and request to stay remote due to risk. I'll have to go in if denied. I miss seeing students, but my health, safety and my children come first. Being on a cart the exposure and possible super spreader as we'll be in their space for more than 15 minutes indoors. (singing or no singing and mask or no masks) I really need to wait until there's a vaccine to be with even a small group of people but if I'm denied I will need to go in as I can't lose a paycheck either.

I have diabetes, asthma, sleep apnea and have had multiple respiratory infections causing ER visits and hospitalizations the last year. I'm high risk. I've tried to work with the district for ADA accommodation to stay remote. I've been given push back - even to my own Doctor and now need to have the Doctor, besides a letter to support my request, fill out a workability form. If it's not approved, I NEED to go in and teach in person to support my family and risk exposure. Afraid for my health and my family.

Being at high risk if I contract COVID, I spent a great deal of time and thought determining if I should get a letter from my doctor's office, which I did, however, now I am being asked for more documentation, but I feel reluctant, as I really do not want to take a leave of absence or ask for special accommodation. If specialists could continue to teach from home, then I would not have the worry of being at greater risk of contracting the virus by moving from room to room on a cart, being exposed to large numbers of students AND their adult teachers and teaching assistants.

We DON'T teach "Prep." We teach critical subjects just like the MS and HS teachers do. And we should be respected for that and called music, science, art, theater, dance, or phy.ed. teachers just as they are.

Our students have experienced great trauma over the past 6 months. When they return to school- they are going to want to hug and be close with the teachers they trust. Specialists are often those people because we stay with students throughout their years at our schools. How do we navigate the very real social/emotional needs of our young learners while staying distanced?



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