

October 9, 2020

Members of the School Board
Saint Paul Public Schools
St. Paul, MN

Dear Members of the School Board,

The purpose of this letter is to share concerns held by fellow SPFE members at Bruce F. Vento Elementary school if our students, families, and colleagues return to Vento for Stage 2 and Stage 3 hybrid instruction. Our main concerns involve building logistics and how safety measures will be disseminated to our students and families, in particular those who are non-native English speakers.

Four years ago, as part of a district wide review of school buildings, a group of our staff joined members of the Facilities Department and workers from a local architectural firm to discuss a potential building redesign at Vento. After several months of review, the committee denied updates because our ventilation system is underneath the building and cannot be updated without a complete tear down. Since then, we have seen many other schools in the District finalize remodels and upgrades.

Vento is architecturally unique in that it is an open concept building. Each grade level is divided throughout the school by a total of eight enclosed learning pods, essentially a pod for each grade level. Most of these pods are divided only by partitions and storage cabinets and at least half of the pods are directly connected to an adjacent grade level pod. Half of the classrooms in each pod are located on the interior of the building and are without windows to the outside. Additionally, several areas in each learning pod include teacher workspaces that do not have air registers or exchanges to circulate the air in those space. This open concept design is a major area of concern to our staff because the air is so easily shared from learning space to learning space.

Moreover, since Distance Learning 1.0 began last spring, we have learned that prior to March 2020, many staff had experienced physical reactions while working in our building, symptoms that dissipated only when they left for the day or during extended time away (i.e. winter vacation, spring break, summer vacation), but then reemerged when they returned to work. Examples included: irritation to the skin, eyes, and nose, persistent coughing and/or clearing of the throat, as well as migraines. Some staff even shared how doctors' visits were necessary to treat and remedy their ailments- two staff were even diagnosed with workplace specific allergies. These instances are frustrating to us and we feel they are directly related to substandard air quality. Although we have been told that Vento has likely received a filtration upgrade to commence Stage 2 and Stage 3 hybrid learning, we feel confused by the contradiction that our building's ventilation system is inaccessible on one hand but has received upgrades on the other.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we worry immensely about the health and safety of the students and families who will return to Vento for hybrid instruction. A majority of our students receive EL services and come from families who are non-native English speakers. Many Vento students live in multigenerational households or in situations where childcare is led by an elderly family member. Our building has the good fortune of employing colleagues who fulfill duties as language translators to our families. During a regular school scenario these colleagues are often able to relay information in a variety of languages at a moment's notice. However, the ease to which this happens is usually when the information is coming from the school itself. On behalf of our non-native English-speaking families, we wonder how quickly information will be shared with them to ensure they can make decisions that are best for their households.

In closing, SPPS community members recently received access to a video showing what school will look like as we return for the various hybrid stages. At Vento, we feel this video will create a false sense of security for our families, students, and staff because the school building we saw in the video was one that underwent a remodel and upgrade. In reality, the Vento community will be consumed by a whole other set of circumstances which one of our fellow members so eloquently shared; see below:

-As far as specific to Vento, here are my biggest concerns but certainly not all my concerns:

- 1. Ventilation - our building is old and our system is old. I know they said they are getting it ready for the specific filter meant for the virus but I don't feel safe with just that being done. Specifically, we have pods that share space and air- **CDC has said (as recently as last week) the virus spreads farther than 6 feet indoors even with filters and people wearing masks.** We have windowless areas. This causes a huge concern due to the virus being spread through the air. A better filter and running the system a couple of hours longer each day is NOT going to take care of our ventilation problems and the potential for all of us or any of us becoming ill from this virus. I am concerned that our families really don't know how bad Vento is as far as the ventilation system and how this creates a significant problem in spreading the virus.*
- 2. I am concerned about students needing more help from teachers at their age which means we will not be able to keep a safe 'social distance'. I am concerned families will not understand that school will not be school as they know it. Our young students will not be able to engage in social development, collaboration, and even play as they sit at tables all day to do their work. Even if we as teachers are told by our district and building administrators that students are to go to a station or center in the classroom they will be with another student in close proximity, as a result putting each student at a health risk and ultimately putting all of us at risk of getting the virus.*
- 3. I am concerned that teachers will be left being in charge of too much cleaning throughout the day and at the end of the day leaving us to clean up germs that are possibly exposing us to the virus.*
- 4. I am concerned that we are teaching students who may be sick and families send them to school knowing they are sick. This happens in any normal school year and now we are being exposed to COVID-19 when any sick student is sent to school. Once they are at school we are 'exposed'.*
- 5. I am concerned about the load of teacher responsibilities with hybrid teaching. This school district knows how hard we work and beyond our hours of the school day. You have teachers that are dedicated to our profession and to our community of learners and you are putting us at risk when 'everyone' can be safely learning through Distance Learning.*
- 6. I am concerned and scared that we have a student, or a family member die from COVID-19 because we are in person learning. I don't want to live with that the rest of my life and the district can't put enough safety measures in place to prevent this possibility.*

"I am concerned and scared about getting sick from a virus that I have been very careful not to get and careful not to be exposed to and possibly dying. I am scared that a family member will die from COVID-19 or will have long term life health problems from the virus when the best and safest solution is to be at home and teach through Distance Learning. This is the safest way to teach our students until we have a vaccine. This is a United States pandemic crisis. Please keep our students safe, our families safe, and all educators safe until we are safely through this crisis!"

Thank you for your time. Be safe and well.

Signed,

Fellow Vento SPFE Members

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|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Matt Shimon | Jade Fischer | August Spiegelberg | Susan Feland |
| Sherril Erickson | Carissa Tetzlaff | Jennifer Geng | Colleen Boell |
| Shelley Norton | Claire Roberts | Jamie Peterson | Celine Vang |
| Kristine Ranweiler | Rachel Kumher | Rady Yang | Nicole Gehrman |
| Andrea Caruso | Alison Fox | Nenah Howard | Cameron Mcwhorter |
| Heather Miller | Danelle Imbertson | Diana Romo | Catherine Kautt |
| NouKou Xiong | Jon Tufte | Zoua Vue | Christine Vang |
| Jeni Martinson | Bobby Snyder | Jessica Jordan | Katy Steinbach |
| Ramona Erickson | Mandee Scherping | Shelby Anderson | Cass Heigaard |
| Jennifer Courtright | Danielle Sininger | Julie Blake | Hannah Soule |
| Jane Hall-Dayle | Ellyn Goldie | Plia Vang | Brittney Thompson |