

October 20, 2020

Board of Education  
Saint Paul Public Schools

To Dr. Gothard and Directors Foster, Ellis, Brodrick, Marchese, Allen, Kopp and Vue,

We are teachers, licensed staff, EAs, SCSPs, and TAs at Paul and Sheila Wellstone Elementary. Last Wednesday, October 14, our school celebrated Wellstone Day, a day when we learn about the legacy of our school namesakes. We often discuss the Paul Wellstone quote “We all do better when we all do better” and that has never been truer than this year when we are constantly preoccupied with taking care of each other. We are a strong community that has already seen COVID-19 directly affect our students and staff, and we have serious concerns about the effects of returning to our building for stage 2 or 3 hybrid instruction.

Our building was not designed with elementary in mind. Since our old building spent most of its years as a secondary school, we have a huge amount of common space full of surfaces that get heavy traffic on a daily basis. Very few classrooms have sinks and our bathrooms were designed for middle schoolers, not young children. The sinks are inside each bathroom, making it impossible for staff to supervise proper student handwashing. While we understand that surface transfer is not currently believed to be a primary source of spread for COVID-19, it’s developmentally normal for young children, like those we are considering bringing into the building, to put their fingers in their mouths, nose, and eyes. The challenges of creating a sanitary environment have a greater impact in an elementary setting than they would with older students or adults.

Another challenge in our old building is ventilation. The oldest sections were originally a high school and several additions were added for a middle school. The aging HVAC system is inconsistent and unreliable. Ventilation specifically has always been an issue; when a neighbor across the street has a bonfire, everyone in the building knows about it. Our understanding is that the ventilation system cannot support at MERV 13 filter, which is the recommended level. Some of our kindergarten classrooms do not have windows to the outdoors, so they have no options to ensure adequate airflow. We understand that the SPPS facilities crew is working to create as much airflow as possible and upgrading filters to MERV 11. With cold weather approaching, however, we will soon be cooped up inside and have fewer ways to bring in fresh air.

Social distancing in our rooms is a major concern. Our individual classrooms are, for the most part, old and very small. When new staff members come to our building, they often comment that these are the smallest classrooms they have ever seen. Staff and students are creative with our space, but there’s no way to create additional space for social distancing. We have seen pictures of sample classrooms in other buildings, and the amount of space those teachers have is completely different than our reality. We have not heard anything about plexiglass desk dividers or other methods to block the movement of droplets through the air. According to the map we’ve seen, many of our classrooms can only fit a maximum of eleven people with six feet of space, and some can only fit nine. We also have all day pre-k in our

building. It's hard to imagine how four-year-olds will follow social distancing protocols for 7 hours straight.

We have been told that specialist teachers will not be able to use their own spaces but will instead be shuffled around the building on carts. They will therefore still be exposed to many classes of kids each day. We are concerned that this does nothing to protect students, because our specialist classrooms are actually considerably bigger than the average grade level room. This also puts more educators into the same breathing space. Specialist classes are when classroom teachers have preparation and meeting time, so if classroom teachers wanted to do any work in their classrooms they would then be sharing space with another adult. The other option would be sharing common work spaces with other teachers, thereby increasing our collective risk of transmission. This also presents a huge challenge for our specialists, who have varying accessibility needs and would have to scramble to bring materials for completely different standards through a huge three-level building on a cart.

The strain of distance learning is already taxing us professionals, without having to simultaneously monitor students in person while teaching online. In our building, each grade is split into two programs, both English language instruction and Spanish dual immersion. Because of the language difference, we can't share the load of creating lessons between the programs. For dual immersion, we have the added challenge of making everything accessible in two languages, translating nearly everything we find, and scrounging for resources in Spanish. Due to budget cuts we have two split classes, which means that those teachers have to modify two sets of grade level standards in two languages and have no one to share the workload with. Our educators are doing everything in their power to make distance learning work for our students. Trying to do everything we are already doing with stressful in-person instruction layered on top is a recipe for burnout.

Our building also has a setting 3 program for emotional and behavioral disorders. According to their IEPs, these students would have time in both the general education classroom and the Special Education room. Will students move between these two spaces during the day? If students are only in the Special Education room all day, they would be better isolated from extra exposure but deprived of their right to a least-restrictive setting. Many of these students need intensive physical support in the classroom from teachers and TAs. What happens when a student is being unsafe and has to be restrained? Is there any training for a safe way to do this? How can our staff maintain social distance in that scenario? How can we keep our students and ourselves safe?

We have a large staff and a chronic lack of substitute teachers. We dread morning emails with the list of who is out that day with the words "NO SUB" next to their name, because it means the rest of us are scrambling to divide kids, skip preps, or lose the day's plans with a co-teacher. When sickness inevitably arises, who will cover the absence? How will we deal with multiple teachers who are quarantining due to COVID? How will students respond to the constant change?

Most importantly, we fear the impact of illness and unpredictability on our students and their families. Our community has already seen the dangerous effects of the coronavirus; when the school year started, one of our colleagues was hospitalized with COVID and is still recovering. Many of our students live in multigenerational families or receive care from grandparents during the day. That need would not go away in hybrid, it would just mean that

our students will have many more interactions and opportunities for exposure. We have students from undocumented families who face challenges getting necessary healthcare. Our families are working incredibly hard to support their students and our staff is working equally hard to provide engaging, consistent, and relevant instruction. A high percentage of our students are multilingual learners and come from communities that are already at a disproportionate risk for COVID. Exposing our students to COVID means exposing extended families and adding uncertainty to an already difficult year.

Families are being forced to choose between remaining with a trusted teacher and their classmates for an uncertain hybrid situation or finding themselves starting over with an unknown teacher and cut off from classmates in a new virtual school setting. Many of our families have not been informed or consulted about the district plans. They turn to us for answers but because we still have no clear agreements, we cannot help them, leading to more fear for both families and staff.

We are in the midst of an uncontrolled pandemic. Because of generations of inequity, it's hitting communities like ours the hardest. We are scared of the emotional, physical, and psychological toll it could have for all of us if we lose a member of our community to this disease.

Wellstone is a family. We look out for each other. Our school symbol is the green bus and our expectations are: Be Responsible, Use Respect, and Safe Community. Right now, creating a safe community is absolutely the most urgent goal. We are keeping our community safe and our students engaged through distance learning, and we are deeply concerned by the possibility of risking all of that by rushing into hybrid instruction.

Sincerely,  
Staff of Paul and Sheila Wellstone Elementary

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