



October 29, 2020

Mr. Harrison Peters  
Superintendent, Providence Public Schools  
797 Westminister Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Ms. Angélica Infante-Green  
Rhode Island Commissioner of Education  
RI Department of Education  
255 Westminister Street  
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Commissioner Infante-Green and Superintendent Peters:

It is with a great sense of frustration and a greater sense of purpose that I am asking you to temporarily close Nathanael Greene Middle School in Providence, where COVID-19 is spreading and more than 30 staff members are out on leave due to COVID-19-related issues, making any sense of quality teaching a herculean task, at best. Our request is that you immediately close the school to shift to distance learning and meet with us by tomorrow, Friday, Oct. 30, to discuss conditions necessary for safe reopening of the building.

If the school is not closed and a resolution found to the myriad problems affecting students and staff, the Providence Teachers Union will be filing a lawsuit against the state and school officials, seeking to shut down the school temporarily. There is an emergency at the school posing an immediate danger to students, teachers, staff and their families.

While we are only seeking to address this most urgent situation at Greene, similar situations are occurring at other Providence schools. We hope that a resolution at Greene will inform our approach to those situations and any new ones that will arise.

Greene is experiencing an increasing number of COVID-19 cases, substantial contact tracing delays that have potentially exposed adults and children, chronic unsafe in-school conditions, and an inability to provide quality education to students—with nearly half the staff out due to quarantine, some with symptoms and others who are positive with the actual infection.

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Letter to Superintendent Peters and Commissioner Infante-Green

As of Wednesday, October 28, here was the situation at Nathanael Greene, where, as you may know, I am a special education teacher:

- At least three students and two staff members have tested positive.
- 33 staff members are out due to COVID-19-related problems.
  - Twenty-two are on official Rhode Island Department of Health-directed quarantine, and the rest are on leave either getting tested or awaiting quarantine guidance from RIDOH.
- Because nearly half of the staff is on leave, the school is co-mingling the so-called stable pods.
- Greene is bringing in teachers from other buildings, who continue to teach their classes virtually as they monitor classes of students who are getting their instruction virtually.
- Three classes at a time are being held/monitored in larger spaces like the gym and cafeteria by one teacher.
- In some rooms, students are sitting within two feet of one another.
- Greene parents have received form letters and robocalls regarding each new case, but they are terribly confused and have no idea what is happening in their own child's classroom. What is being shared, however, is the false narrative that spaces are being managed and the school is safe.

Contact tracing delays at the state level have delayed notifications of close contact to some employees, including a substitute teacher at Greene, who was sent home on October 27 and told to quarantine based on a close contact with a COVID-19-positive person on October 16. That substitute was in school for more than 10 days after exposure. We have heard of several other similar stories around the district.

We believe the situation has reached this extremely dangerous point because there is no metric or defined criteria that every school and/or district must follow on how to handle positive cases and quarantines that hinder the safe daily operations of running a school. We have repeatedly asked for clear standards that all schools in the state should follow, but that request has been rejected and now we are facing the consequences.

Our legal action will ask for clear, specific guidelines in the event that we have multiple positive cases and quarantines that disrupt instruction and put students and teachers at risk. We demand answers on important and practical issues, such as how to handle classroom coverage, how to prevent breaking pods, how to have safe transitions, how to reduce class sizes, and the creation of a clear and specific standard that is used to determine when a school should be closed.

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It has become abundantly clear that Providence public schools are being treated differently than those in other cities in the state. For instance, schools in Cranston, North Providence, Woonsocket and Cumberland, as well as Times2, a district-run charter in Providence, have temporarily closed due to positive cases because, among other reasons, they didn't have enough teachers and staff to cover the schools or actually teach kids, or out of an abundance of caution and concern for the health of staff and students. We need equity and clear standards to guide these decisions.

The situation has gone horribly wrong, placing students, teachers, and staff at risk. There is no uniform plan or guidance in place and therefore, schools are not educationally sound for kids. These students are not only being exposed to the virus, but also dealing with being taught by teachers who may or may not be their regular teacher and are simultaneously teaching another class, virtually.

Families are currently being told that things are under control, carefully managed and safe, but this is simply not true.

The decision that our next step will be to take legal action didn't come easily, but the risks to the health and safety of teachers, staff and the families we serve demand strong action.

As always, my team and I are available to collaborate on a resolution to these safety and health issues, as we did with the Virtual Learning Academy. If action to close the school and discussions around a path to reopening are not in motion by tomorrow, Friday, October 30, our attorney will proceed with the lawsuit.

Respectfully,



Maribeth K. Calabro  
President

Cc: Gov. Gina Raimondo