



Memorandum

To: Mayor Ruthanne Fuller, School Committee Members, Commissioner Deborah Youngblood and Commissioner Josh Morse
From: Councilors Josh Krintzman, Marc Laredo, Brenda Noel, Becky Grossman, Julia Malakie, David Kalis, Chris Markiewicz, Emily Norton, Alison Leary, Lisle Baker, Maria Greenberg, Pam Wright, Holly Ryan, Alicia Bowman, Vicki Danberg and Bill Humphrey
Re: Reopening our Schools for In-Person Learning
Date: January 10, 2021

We are writing to urge immediate action to increase the opportunities for in-person learning within the Newton Public Schools. Specifically, we request that that the Administration and the School Committee: (1) establish public health parameters for a safe return to school this year; (2) form an expert advisory committee; (3) expand testing of NPS employees; and (4) plan now for full in-person learning next year.

Public Health Parameters for a Safe Return to School

Our goal must be to return all of our children to as much in-person learning as possible *this year*. Last spring, we closed the schools and ultimately decided that in-person learning was not possible at that time. But now that we have been learning about, and living with COVID-19, for almost a full year, the goal must evolve. We have learned how to mitigate against in-school transmission and we, and school districts across the country, including right here in Massachusetts, have seen successful in-person learning without wide in-school virus transmission. We urge you to work with the advisory committee, NPS staff, parents and others to dramatically increase the opportunities for in-person learning **as soon as possible**.

Establish an Expert Advisory Committee

As councilors have been consistently requesting, we believe that the city needs to assemble an expert advisory committee *now* to help guide decision-making in our health department and our public schools. Many of our peer communities, including Brookline, Milton, Salem, and Wellesley, have formed an advisory group of scientists, physicians and other public health experts to work with their health departments and school systems in addressing the many issues posed by COVID-19. Newton residents and others with similar expertise – indeed, some of the foremost experts in the nation, if not the world - have offered to serve our city in a similar capacity *for free*. We must avail ourselves of this assistance.

As Commissioner Youngblood noted at the Programs and Services meeting on January 6, 2021, our knowledge of the best ways to address COVID-19 regularly evolves. While we acknowledge that the city is trying to follow the latest federal and state recommendations, we are at a loss to understand the refusal to utilize the free services of so many world-renowned experts living right here in Newton.

An advisory committee could help the city determine: appropriate ventilation standards and whether they are being met; what a viable testing regimen would be; how to safely balance social distancing with in-school programming; and an appropriate balance between public health precautions and social-emotional needs of students.

We strongly urge the Administration and the School Committee to convene this expert advisory committee as soon as possible.

Expanded Testing for Teachers and Staff

The science is clear: testing is a critical component of any public health response and a safe return to schools on a broader scale. Two key goals in any testing regimen should be: (a) rapid turn-around-time of results for symptomatic individuals; and (b) early detection and surveillance for outbreak prevention.

While we are pleased that we are beginning some testing of teachers and staff, we are concerned that it is not frequent enough and too difficult to administer. We have been advised that this program is only scheduled to run for two months (January and February) and requires teachers and staff to travel to the Ed Center to be tested under the supervision of senior school department personnel.

Recently, a group of physician/scientist parents in our community wrote to the city's elected officials urging increased frequency of the testing. We urge the Administration and the School Committee to work with the expert advisory committee to implement the optimal testing program as soon as possible.

Planning for next year

Now is the time to plan for next year, including considering a variety of options depending on the availability of vaccines and other measures. But regardless of what options we develop, we cannot wait. As members of the City Council, we will support the necessary financial resources for full in-person learning for next year.

We remain ready, willing and able to assist you in any and all of these efforts.