

Bergen County Education Association  
210 West Englewood Ave.  
Teaneck, NJ 07666

August 5, 2020

Bergen County Office of Education  
One Bergen County Plaza  
3rd Floor, Room 350  
Hackensack, NJ 07601  
Attn: Louis DeLisio, Interim Executive County Superintendent

***"The numbers are setting off alarms that we are taking very seriously," Murphy said at his briefing on Friday. "We still may be among the leaders in lower case numbers and daily positivity rates... but we are standing in a very dangerous place."***

***-[NorthJersey.com](http://NorthJersey.com), July 31, 2020***

Dear Mr. DeLisio,

On behalf of the nearly 20,000 education professionals who work in Bergen County's public schools, we, the officers of the Bergen County Education Association, and the undersigned local association presidents of Bergen County, urge you to recommend postponing the in-person reopening of schools in September, until such time as the safety and well-being of all students and staff can be assured. Simply put, our schools are not safe to open while New Jersey's COVID-19-related indicators are so erratic, progressively revealing a negative and troubling trend. There is no argument that education and socialization are vital to Bergen County's students; however, we should never put them at risk unnecessarily, when safer options, such as remote learning, are achievable.

As we hear from our members throughout the county, the overwhelming burden of safety falls squarely upon their shoulders. From teachers ensuring students follow ever-evolving protocols, to custodians putting in extra hours to sanitize; from bus drivers making extra runs, to cafeteria workers distributing grab-and-go meals; from secretaries facing all who enter the building to security guards maintaining order during a tense time--everyone faces increased exposure to COVID-19, with limited alternatives, and even more limited access to personal protective equipment. Furthermore, many of our school buildings are old, in need of capital improvements and/or are not equipped with proper HVAC filtration systems that will safely exchange air and effectively block air-borne virus particulates. For years, air quality issues have plagued many of our districts' facilities, and without the necessary investments in rectifying this situation, students and staff will be exposed to unnecessary risks.

The current generation of COVID-19 tests are taking anywhere from four days to two weeks to offer results. That is simply not fast enough to enable efficient decision-making regarding case isolation, quarantines, and overall building safety. How can we keep our students and school

employees safe without accurate, rapid diagnostic measures in place? The rate at which asymptomatic carriers, such as school-aged children, inadvertently contribute to the virus' spread, is unknown, and therefore, worrisome. Given their anticipated proximity to school employees, even with attempted and earnest applications of social distancing protocols, one can only surmise that upon the repeated and frequent gathering of those students, a recipe for disaster is in the making. Studies have also shown that middle school and high school-aged students must be treated as adults, in terms of the virus' transmission, garnering additional concerns.

We understand many of our students have unmet technological needs. Instead of scrambling for funds to cover the costs of in-person instruction, school budgets should be redirected to ensure remote learning for all our students. We support Governor Murphy's call to "bridge the digital divide," and believe that all our students, no matter their racial/ethnic identity or their zip code, deserve equal access to internet connectivity and access to one-to-one digital devices.

While we also understand the desire to return to routine, we cannot fathom why schools—of all places—are the places to begin. How can schools possibly be prepared for opening to dozens, hundreds, and even thousands of individuals when restaurants and gyms cannot yet open? Under existing state guidelines, grocery stores limit the number of entrants and enforce social distancing, and salons, larger than an average classroom, allow less than ten people inside. Why are the safety protocols not the same for schools?

We empathize with parents who are eager to return to work and who count on their community's schools to care for, feed, as well as educate, their children. We know just how important our schools are to them. However, public school employees are parents and family members, too. We are also faced with scheduling incompatibilities and deficits in childcare. We, too, live in multi-generational households and must consider the safety and well-being of our own families, and whether we will become an unwitting, asymptomatic carrier, endangering the life of a statistically vulnerable loved one. And we too, have our own, individual health concerns, keeping us awake at night, navigating the intricacies of requesting workplace accommodations, contemplating a pre-mature retirement, or solemnly pondering the risks of returning to working in-person.

These concerns are merely tips of the iceberg as we face this unprecedented crisis. Regardless of how we address these concerns, the primary question we should be asking ourselves is: How can we live with the death of a student or colleague, if the case of COVID-19 was contracted while at school?

With virtual and remote educational models in existence, we must do all we can to prevent such unnecessary and avoidable, heartbreak and loss.

There is no doubt that educators are frontline workers, willing to do what it takes to educate and to protect their students. But why are we being ordered to return to any configuration of working in-person, in an unsafe environment, when alternative educational options exist?

For these reasons, we urge you to recommend to Governor Murphy and to the New Jersey Department of Education, postponing the reopening of Bergen County's public schools, until such time as the safety and well-being of all students and staff can be assured.

Bergen County's educators, students, and communities deserve nothing less.

In unity,

Sue McBride  
President, Bergen County Education Association

Andy Policastro  
1<sup>st</sup> Vice President, Bergen County Education Association

Esther Fletcher  
2<sup>nd</sup> Vice President, Bergen County Education Association

Jennifer Clemen  
Treasurer, Bergen Count Education Association

Mariann Kronyak  
President, Carlstadt Education Association

Jon Bercovici  
President, Bergen County Vocational Technical Schools Education Association

Jon Kulhawy and Jason Dates  
Co-Presidents, Upper Saddle River Education Association

Bridget Nunez  
President, Cliffside Park Education Association

John Sterling  
President, Bogota Education Association

Michael Warren  
President, Hasbrouck Heights Education Association

John Dean  
President, Teaneck Township Education Association

Darla Ferdinand  
President, Ridgefield Education Association

Elyse Schifrien and Rick H. Gladstone  
Co-Presidents, Bergen County Special Services Education Association

Cean L. Spahn  
President, Fort Lee Education Association

Annie Pacciani  
President, Emerson Education Association

Jackie Wellman  
President, Tenafly Education Association

Kathleen Arlin  
President, Dumont Education Association

Robert M. La Morte  
President, Wyckoff Education Association

David Vignola  
President, Englewood Teachers Association

Tobyn DeMarco  
President, Bergen Community College Faculty Association

John Sassi  
President, Leonia Education Association

Jason Kuhns  
President, Becton Education Association

Scott Sirota  
President, Ramsey Education Association

Julia Guttilla  
President, Bergenfield Education Association

Sharon Milano  
President, Franklin Lakes Education Association

Sean Voorhis  
President, South Bergen Jointure Commission Education Association

Mary Lach  
President, Bergen County Technical Schools Secretarial Personnel Association

Stephen Presa  
President, River Vale Education Association

Amy Kenny  
President, Closter Education Association

Julia Ogden  
President, Woodcliff Lake Education Association Pascack Regional

Andrew Conn and Kristy Vazquez,  
Co-Presidents, Harrington Park Education Association

Sara Magretto  
President, Northern Highlands Regional HS Education Association

Ellen Davis  
President, Hillsdale Education Association

Nicole Castaldo and Kristen Pettersson  
Co-Presidents, Edgewater Education Association

Gabriel Ben-Nun,  
President, Wood-Ridge Education Association

Jim Fink  
President, Glen Rock Education Association

Christopher C. Pinto  
President, Westwood Education Association

Suzanne Hartsuiker  
President, Oakland Education Association

Pat Alfieri  
President, Cresskill Education Association

Cory Scelsa  
President, East Rutherford Education Association

Staci Anson  
President, Ramapo-Indian Hills Education Association

Frank DiLorenzo  
President, Education Association of South Hackensack

Christine Torticill and Jaclyn Auriemma  
Co-Presidents, Englewood Cliffs Education Association

Kear Halstater  
President, River Dell Education Association

Enrica Gilikin  
President, Garfield Education Association (NJEA)

Mary Meier and Kathryn McLean  
Co-Presidents, Ho-Ho-Kus Education Association

Amanda DiLullo Bellottie and Cathy Doheny  
Co-Presidents, Palisades Park Education Association

Mary Ellen Murphy  
President, Ridgefield Park Education Association

Dawn Ebner  
President, Fair Lawn Education Association

Daniel Pitre  
President, Maywood Education Association

Maureen Donatien  
President, Midland Park Education Association

Lisa Kilgallen and Angela Wilkos  
Co-Presidents, Saddle River Education Association

Donald Hard  
President, Wallington Education Association

June E. Taylor  
President, Allendale Education Association

Gina DeMar  
President, Park Ridge Education Association

Francine Santos  
President, Lodi Education Association

Donna Simon  
President, Montvale Education Association Pascack Regional

Joanne Werner and Michelle Greenberg  
President and Vice President, Demarest Education Association

Alan Weisberg  
President, Bergen County Special Services 192-193 Education Association

Arianna DeAquino  
President, Saddle Brook Education Association

Maria Kittaneh  
President, Elmwood Park Education Association

Robert E. Williams  
President, Lyndhurst Education Association

Donna M. West  
President, Hackensack Education Association

Sylvia Gonzalez  
President, Fairview Education Association

Debra Leopold  
President, Little Ferry Education Association

Dan Farinola  
President, North Arlington Education Association

John Manning  
President, Waldwick Education Association

Nick Rosolanko  
President, Old Tappan Education Association

Shari Mendelson  
President, Education Association of Paramus

Andy Beutel  
President, Mahwah Education Association

Lynn LePage  
President, New Milford Education Association

Melissa Pizza  
President, Oradell Education Association

Melissa Gant and Christine O'Keefe  
Co-Presidents, River Edge Education Association

Stephanie Castellano and Colleen Fencik  
Co-Presidents, Rutherford Education Association