

Wishing there was more of an update ...

Hello Fellow Members:

Many of us are in a state of anxiety. For the members who are not already back, it's going to feel like being a first year teacher all over again. Please take it slow, be as kind to yourself as you will be to your students as we navigate changes in behavior and environment, mask wearing, social distancing, and signage.

Stamina comes to mind. I feel from a leadership perspective we are making progress, albeit slowly, so slow it feels stagnant at times, put progress just the same. Here are a few bits of information.

My comments to the School Committee this evening.

Good Evening, my name is Mary Shepherd, president of the Wachusett Regional Education Association. Tonight I ask the school committee and district administrators: are you listening to the educators in your schools? At Naquag Elementary School in Rutland, students are taught how to listen, with their ears, their eyes, their body language, and their hearts. They are instructed how to truly listen to others - a skill many adults still strive to perfect, myself included. Let's reflect on some district communication breakdowns.

First, because Wachusett is a large district any message sent to parents and students should be well developed, concise, and clearly written. For instance, and this is just one of several examples, teachers found out about the hybrid model, on a Friday afternoon via an email posted on Facebook from a parent. Why couldn't that message go out to teachers at the same time, or maybe ahead of time, with some directives, so staff were prepared to field our parents' questions? This lack of communication divides us as a community, staff members felt omitted from correspondence that should have brought everyone together as we move forward during a pandemic. We need the district

administration to embrace - not reject - a community centered culture, and bridge the many personal agendas, by listening for understanding.

Second, in one of our professional development sessions with Jessica Minahan, a board-certified behavior analyst, author, special educator, and consultant to schools internationally, we learned when anxiety increases, these skills decrease: self-regulations, thought stopping, social skills, executive functioning skills, and flexible thinking. Let's think about this for a minute ... we are in a pandemic and anxieties are high for teachers, students, and parents. For many WREA members who have transitioned and will transition into hybrid, these concerns consistently overwhelm them. What do I need to teach in hybrid? Will I receive training to be successful? Or do I have to figure it out myself again? Do I or do my students wipe the desks down every hour, everyday, every cohort change? What kinds of chemicals will I be exposed to when cleaning? What about the HVAC system? Is the air safe? How do I keep all the cohorts on the same pace? Do parents understand with the hybrid model there will be less face time with teachers? How come I haven't heard anything yet? When will I hear something? I want someone to listen, I have concerns, I want answers, my success and prior planning affects the success of my students. Please listen, if you understand, these challenges are real and need concrete solutions.

Third, we have teachers in the buildings. We have students in the buildings. What we do not have are district administrators in the buildings. In fact, the one administrator who did enter a school, declined to enter a room in order to "protect the bubble". What bubble? These students and staff go back into the community every day - just as this administrator does. If that person does not feel safe, how can WREA members? Safety concerns are real for special education educators in the buildings, special education staff are working in close proximity to students, reminding students to wear masks and socially distance throughout the day, and despite these efforts the classrooms have been affected by COVID

positive cases. With the rising COVID cases in communities all around, the governor has increased precautions for the general public, yet decreased the metrics for keeping schools open, we understand this is blatantly contradictory. Don't hold Thanksgiving dinner with more than ten guests, but put twenty-three kids on a school bus and more in a school. Is DESE's office open to the public? Why aren't we holding school committee meetings in person, how will you lead by example? Educators are listening to understand and want to know how this contradiction will be cleared up.

Finally, WREA members would like to know: are we ready to bring even more students back? Planning takes time, it takes vision and intuition. Our orientation day originally scheduled for September 1st, is now a TBD day on the district calendar and must be used by the end of the school year. Teachers want this day to complete the transition into hybrid, and call for an opportunity to meet with Dr. McCall to answer questions about hybrid expectations. Not only would it show that the district understands the immense pressure teachers face entering the hybrid model, it would also empower district educators and allow us to pass that assurance and strength on to our students. We are all human beings on a life's journey, so let's start acting like it. We must raise our words, not our voices, and begin the healing process our nation's president-elect is talking about. Let us listen to understand each other and make connections to create a community centered culture where everyone belongs.

The topics WREA is fighting for in the MOA.

Negotiations have been grueling, usually there are weeks in between meetings with the district, but with the hybrid MOA there have only been days. Each negotiation session with the district requires a pre-meeting or two, and after the meeting with the district, there is a recap/debriefing kind of meeting. We return to

the bargaining table tomorrow afternoon and again on Thursday, if needed. Here is a highlight of the areas we are working on:

NOTE: THIS INFORMATION IS FOR WREA MEMBERS ONLY

- Working Conditions Modifications, including a hybrid definition and hybrid learning design, student week, and staff week
- Work Day/Work Year/Assignment, including accommodations for staff, Wednesdays
- General Working Conditions, educator responsibilities around attendance, learning platforms, and meetings
- Health and Safety, including masks and mask breaks, no lunches in the classrooms, cleaning procedures in addition to or duplicated from local and state guidance.

A note of appreciation.

First, I want personally to thank our negotiation team members and silent observers for their dedication and commitment for the benefit of us all. This year has been like none other and has taken patience and perseverance. Also, I would like to give a shout out to our building and discipline representatives on HOD. Please continue to share your concerns, so that we might find more commonalities between members to strengthen our unity. Lastly, to our newly formed Communications and Action Subcommittee, you are the wind beneath our wings that move us forward with passion.

In Unity,

Mary Shepherd

President WREA