Winooski Education Association

Based on our collective knowledge and expertise as a community of educators and medical professionals, it is our assessment that *regular*, in-person instruction *on a district-wide basis* is neither feasible — given the safety measures outlined by the CDC and VDH — nor beneficial for students on an academic *or* social-emotional level.

Furthermore, we believe that the *requirement* of staff to teach in-person, in-building district-wide — as is stipulated in the current hybrid model — puts the health and safety of our school community at risk unnecessarily. **Consequently, we cannot endorse the current hybrid model at this time, nor any model that incorporates *regular, in-person* instruction district-wide.** *We have arrived at these conclusions based on the set of observations outlined in subsequent pages.*

In lieu of the current hybrid model, the Winooski Education Association endorses an education learning center model, which would provide in-person 1:1 or small-group *targeted academic intervention* and *social-emotional support* by staff members *who opt-in to on-campus instruction*, specifically for our most at-risk* students, in conjunction with district-wide high-quality remote instruction.[1]

This proposed model would utilize school facilities and grounds as a resource center open to students on a need-based, scheduled basis in order to provide this targeted support, and for the additional purpose of trouble-shooting technology issues and other impediments to accessing remote content at-home. We propose that this targeted intervention occur in *high-ventilation* indoor spaces OR tented, outdoor environments when at all possible, to best mitigate risk of both droplet and airborne transmission of COVID-19.

Similar models are being adopted by school districts across New England — including many districts with low community case count — detailed plans for which are linked below.[2] We believe such a model will be more productive and beneficial for students academically and holistically, as well as safer and more sustainable long-term. We urgently request the opportunity to speak with the board in an emergency meeting, to be held by Friday, August 21st.

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[1] *"at-risk students" encompasses many marginalized student populations within our community, including *but not limited to*: English Language Learners (ELLs); students with Emotional Disturbance; students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); students with cognitive impairment and/or learning disabilities; students with Depression and/or Anxiety Disorders

[2] Mill River Unified Union School District: **Remote through October**, at which point the district will reassess
Everett Public Schools: **Remote** with option for "education learning center"; Anticipated hybrid start date: Nov. 16
Weymouth Public Schools : **Remote**; Phased-in hybrid model *no earlier* than Nov. 16; ***9/21 for SpEd High Needs***

Winooski Education Association

Supporting Statements & Observations

- **ACADEMIC INSTRUCTION & SUPPORT: Pedagogical strategies and social emotional supports necessary for productive, holistic in-person instruction are not possible on a district-wide/school-wide basis given the safety precautions outlined by the CDC and VDH due to the following:**
    - Inability of students and staff to hear one another through masks when speaking to ask questions; share thoughts and insights; or provide feedback.
    - Inability to safely perform academically and emotionally beneficial classroom routines and activities *including but not limited to*: partner work; small-group work; close one-to-one instructional support; "circle time" gathering in elementary classrooms; close-range modeling for tracking text while reading
    - Inability to provide best-practice social-emotional and comfort support given distancing and other safety measures

- **EQUITY: The academic and social emotional limitations of district-wide in-person instruction — given safety guidelines — disproportionately negatively impact our most at-risk students (including English Language Learners, students with Emotional Disturbance, students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, etc.) in the midst of a pandemic that already disproportionately sickens and kills marginalized populations (namely Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).**
    - For ***English Language Learners*** **(ELLs)** and particularly for newcomer ELLs still struggling to take risks in their new language — i.e. using new vocabulary, working on pronunciation, etc. — **the opportunity to benefit from an immersed language experience is completely lost** due to necessary safety precautions.
    - **Delays in acquisition of oral language** (due to mask wearing) will stunt ELL development of phonemic awareness, academic vocabulary, and understanding of basic grammatical structures spoken in context, thus *impeding their ability to learn to read and write*, **leading to further increase in the achievement gap for these students in particular.**
    - Research-proven best practices for teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) and Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) instruction — such as close partner work and triad groups — cannot currently be utilized for indoor, in-person instruction given necessary distancing and safety precautions.

- **A higher population of our BIPOC students (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) live in multigenerational households** than do our white students, which puts our BIPOC families at disproportionately higher risk of having a loved one fall seriously ill or die as a result of contracting COVID-19 as a result of school reopening.

- **<u>RELATIVE BENEFITS & SUSTAINABILITY OF REMOTE INSTRUCTION:</u> High quality remote instruction will yield greater academic gains and social-emotional wellbeing for the majority of students as compared to the extremely limiting — if not detrimental — constraints inherent to regular in-person instruction on a district-wide level. Furthermore, scaling back our in-person instructional offerings will enable us to better target any *in-person* instruction *to meet the needs of our most at-risk students*.**
  - Teachers can better and more authentically communicate with students verbally and nonverbally — i.e. through facial expression — through remote platforms.
  - Given safety constraints inhibiting use of shared classroom supplies and materials, much of the student work produced during the proposed in-person instruction would occur on Chromebooks in any case.
  - Teacher familiarity and skill sets with remote platforms improved dramatically over the spring term and into summer, yielding success in many disciplines throughout spring learning and summer virtual programs.
  - Even if we were to begin with the hybrid model, *we will almost certainly need to transition to a fully remote model at some point.* **Beginning high-quality remote instruction consistently district-wide *from the outset* will better prepare both students and staff for that inevitable transition.**

- **<u>HEALTH RISK & HVAC DEFICIENCIES</u>: The current guidelines set forth by the CDC and VDH for school reopening do not yet address emerging science regarding airborne transmission of COVID-19 and so do not adequately address and protect students and staff against the risk of airborne transmission. Until scientific research has determined the relative risk of airborne transmission — and this risk has been addressed through sanctioned standards of safety and ventilation — it is inappropriate to bring staff and students into the building for regular, district-wide in-person instruction.**

  - **Emerging science identifies high risk of airborne transmission of COVID-19**, as well as high rate of spread from children ages 10+ (comparable or equivalent to

that of adults) and high concentration of infectious viral cells in respiratory tissue of young children. See studies below, as well as a **detailed report from the Environmental Protection Agency**.[3]

- Though the emerging science around airborne transmission *is still under peer review*, **Dr. William Raszka — a Pediatric Infectious Disease Specialist at UVMMC *and one of our district's designated medical experts* — has noted that "airborne transmission can probably occur"** and that "the relative contribution of airborne transmission to transmission dynamics has yet to be elucidated."
- Dr. Raszka's statements suggest that **A) staff and students *are* at risk of contracting the virus via airborne transmission in school buildings** and **B) the relative risk of airborne transmission** — against which social distancing measures DO NOT PROTECT — **is as of yet unknown.**
- The relative lack of peer-reviewed research around transmission; as well as the *as of yet known and unknown long-term health outcomes of COVID-19* render in-person instruction dangerous to the health of students; student caregivers/families; and educators and their own households.
- **Winooski School District buildings have *known ventilation deficiencies* that have not yet been addressed through the Capital Project.** Though the district is in the process of working towards addressing this issue with HVAC specialists, the extent of the issues outlined *in the district's own Capital Project plan* designate approximately 1.5 million dollars for necessary HVAC updates, and **those improvements cannot feasibly be completed prior to the planned date of in-person reopening** within the current hybrid model. [4]
    a) Page 9 of the district's Facility Evaluation states: "According to ASHRAE, the expected lifespan for commercial HVAC equipment is 20 years, when properly maintained and cleaned annually. While some of these systems continue to function, **they are well past their usable life**, are likely operating at low efficiency, are not energy efficient and in some cases, do not supply sufficient fresh air ventilation."
- **Williston Central School District — a neighboring district *pursuing the same AA/BB hybrid model* as Winooski School District — focused a significant portion of their $20 million renovation on updating their HVAC systems in 2018.** In contrast, Winooski School District *has far less robust* and *expressly*

[3] https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.08.03.20167395v1
https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.07.13.20153049v1
https://www.epa.gov/coronavirus/indoor-air-and-coronavirus-covid-19

[4] https://cp.winooski.org/WP/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/WSD-Facility-Evaluation.8-16-2018.pdf

deficient HVAC systems, and **yet is moving forward with the *same* hybrid model.**

- **RELATIVE SAFETY & ACCOMMODATIONS: Schools are being held to a less stringent standard of safety than other institutions and businesses statewide.**
    a) If held to the same standard as other businesses, Winooski School District should **accommodate no more than 1 occupant (student or teacher) per 100 square feet of classroom space**.
    b) The State of Vermont has issued guidelines for safe reopening of **businesses, municipalities, and cultural institutions**, all of which set a **maximum occupancy of 75 people indoors** at any given time. **The maximum capacity guidelines for schools dramatically exceed those for all other businesses and institutions.**
- **The requirement for all staff — regardless of underlying conditions — to provide in-person instruction contradicts ARTICLE 5.2 - *WORKING CONDITIONS* under our contract, which states:** *"Employees will not be required to work under conditions which constitute an imminent threat to their health and safety when such a threat is established by local, state and/or federal health or safety officials."* **Such a threat *has been established***, as is made evident by the **more stringent safety guidelines** currently outlined for businesses, religious institutions, ***and municipalities*** statewide.

August 13, 2020