

Dear Members of the Great Neck Community:

As Governor Cuomo stated recently, "Parents and teachers must feel safe and secure in each school district's plan to return to school." The Executive Board of the Great Neck Teachers Association can categorically assure you that the vast majority of teachers feel neither "safe" nor "secure" about the district's plans. Given this, and the significant number of parents who've opted to keep their children home (25% districtwide), how can the Superintendent and the Board of Education justify reopening schools?

We share with so many in our community the frustrations at the glacial pace at which information regarding the reopening has been released. Our district will also not meet the Governor's mandate to hold three public meetings with parents, community members, and stakeholders by August 21. On August 20, the central administration scheduled separate live meetings with elementary, middle school, and high school teachers. We're grateful for the communication, albeit at the 11th-hour, but would it have happened at all had the Governor not ordered it?

Now, with under two weeks before schools are scheduled to open, the district's announced instructional plans do not set students and their teachers up for success. Just one example, remote learning on the secondary level calls for a hybrid plan, meaning that classroom teachers see students in class on alternating days, while still needing to engage those not scheduled to be in class. And if it weren't challenging enough to teach the same content to students who are in class and to those who are at home on the same day, there's now a third group of purely remote learners who never physically attend class, but will instead "fly-on-the-wall" livestream their classes one day, and then possibly complete a separately prepared asynchronous lesson at home the next day. All students lose when teachers are required to simultaneously engage in-person learners, learners who are at home (but come to class the next day), and at-home learners who never set foot in their schools.

It's true that the district's five reopening subcommittees were well-represented by teachers and staff—and rightly so. However, the instructional model that's being implemented at the secondary level was never vetted or approved by any of the subcommittees. Instead, it's actually two separate recommended plans that have been stitched together like Frankenstein's monster.

So, what would work better? While the instructional plan for our elementary schools is far from perfect, our youngest students who have opted for 100% remote learning will be grouped with other full-remote students and paired with a teacher who will deliver dedicated online instruction, unlike the secondary model. Elementary remote teachers will be able to directly engage their online learners, addressing their specific needs, without having to also teach physically present students. We acknowledge that creating a schedule at the secondary level where full-remote students are not merely passive observers is a challenge, but it's possible, and our students deserve far better than what the district is proposing.

The bottom line: Great Neck's teachers and a significant number of students don't feel safe in the current plan to reopen schools. And our educators are being asked to teach and perform their jobs in radical new ways without enough time, preparation, or support. We urge the district to begin the year in a full remote learning model until the reopening plans have been thoroughly thought out, taking into account the health and safety of all, as well as providing the best instructional opportunities for all our students.

Jim Daszenski
President, Great Neck Teachers Association