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[CE SBAC] Mental Health Considerations

1 message

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Tue, May 21, 2024 at 4:25 PM

To: cesb@capeelizabetschools.org

Cc: cesbac@capeelizabetschools.org, cetowncouncil@capeelizabeth.org

Dear CE School Board:

I'm unsure I will make it to tonight's meeting so I wanted to send this last minute letter just in case.

We all approach the options to fix the Middle School building problems from different professional perspectives, skills sets and life experiences. Architects. Builders. Educators. Nurses. Financial Analysts. I have only now realized that I haven't spoken from my own professional perspective as a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor. I was first licensed in the mid 90s, have worked as a school counselor in the past, and even worked in Cape schools as a long-term school counselor about ten years ago. I am currently self-employed in private practice in South Portland.

The unique thing about the mental health perspective regarding the middle school issue is that parents and students don't come to the School Building Advisory Committee or the School Board meetings and share concerns related to their own or their children's mental health issues like they will other issues. They don't share their personal concerns about how the Middle School options will impact their family's mental health. And the hard-working social workers and school counselors cannot share their firsthand experiences with students due to confidentiality. So while you may learn a lot about physical safety and educational and financial impacts from the hired professionals, educators, and local citizens, I fear a greater picture hasn't been painted about mental health.

As a professional I see the national statistics of rampantly escalating mental health issues in real time, in real life, and on a daily basis. And anyone who is Facebook friends with me knows that I will periodically post a reminder that I am happy to help ANYONE out, with full confidentiality, in their efforts to find a therapist for themselves or a loved one. It is a deeply personal issue. People don't jump on town social media and ask for therapist recommendations like they would a plumber, so I'm happy to help them to navigate that maze. Without sharing any identifying information, I can tell you that

people in this community reach out to me pretty regularly looking for a therapist for themselves, and more often for their child or teen due to depression and anxiety and panic and self harm and even suicidality.

So what does this have to do with our middle school? I am deeply concerned about how 2-3 years of mobile classrooms will negatively impact our students' mental health. I am concerned

- about the disruption of their physical environment, going from building to building for different classes, or worse yet being stuck in a single room for hours on end.
- about students who need to leave their classrooms to move their bodies or have a quiet space in order to regulate themselves emotionally.
- about students being socially disconnected from their friends from other classrooms during lunch times.
- about students not having access to the gym during a renovation for much needed exercise, which tons of research shows is crucial for mental health.
- that students won't have easy access to the social workers and counselors when needed.
- that not only will their physical safety be compromised in mobile classrooms against outside threats, but their felt sense of safety on an emotional level will be negatively impacted in mobile classrooms as well.

Speaking as a parent, my own anxiety levels rocket whenever I get an email or information from my children about a lockdown or shelter in place or practice drill. I remember the day a few years ago when we did have an intruder gain access through one of the many unsupervised doors at the middle school, doors that will not be addressed in the renovation options. Every single parent, student, and teacher was on high alert that day and for several days after, trying to find out information and assess the situation for physical and emotional safety. Even though it turned out in the end that no one was in physical danger, the emotional impacts were enormous and rippling.

There are many reasons I support Option E and mental health for students, teachers, and parents is very big factor, just behind physical safety.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important perspective.

Kind regards,

Cherie Gustafson, MA, LCPC

cc: CE Town Council, CE SBAC

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