

Subject: Fwd: letter to the APS School Board from the AEA Board of Directors

Below is an Open Letter Response to the Board of Education regarding the AEA Board letter of February 15th. Full text of the original AEA letter is at the bottom.

APS Board of Education

'

The AEA Board did not honor the courtesy of copying me on the letter which was sent to you (copied below) on the 15th but I do believe a direct response to you is necessary. This response is written as an open letter to our whole staff because it is important that I publicly rebut the allegations and misinformation in their public letter. My deepest hope is that a clear response can allow us to move our focus back onto serving our students in the safest and most appropriate environment we can provide. The difficult work being done by our entire staff is not aided by misinformation or a lack of clarity for how decisions get made and have been made.

The letter from the AEA Board was dishonest and inappropriate for a host of reasons.

First, as I noted last night, the body of the letter itself demonstrates the boldness of their misrepresentations. In their first paragraph they say I have not solicited input since winter break but in their second to last paragraph they talk about how I reached out last week to seek their input about Fridays. The letter also ignores the regular meetings we have with their leadership where we discuss any and all of these issues. While the latter is not an in depth input process, it is the process identified in the Master Agreement for maintaining regular lines of communication. The fundamental challenge here is that unless we adopt their view, they contend to you that we have not listened to the AEA Board's input. This self-serving perspective ignores the validity of the views of other stakeholders (parents, students, other staff, other AEA members and non-AEA teachers) and is deceptive about their intent as they address you.

Second, they intentionally try to keep the focus on the February stakeholder survey as if that is the only engagement work that has been done or that should matter. If that was the only way we heard input, I might be inclined to agree with them about its insufficiency. However, they want you and everyone else to ignore all of the other outreach we have conducted in just the last 60 days or are conducting now:

- DDI survey of teachers in December
- Student survey with nearly 11000 responses
- Meeting with parent interest group
- Meetings with City officials, business leaders and community leaders
- 5 Listening Sessions open to all staff but geared toward building staff
- Principal focus group
- Teacher survey about Fridays
- 25 Virtual Site Visits

- 30 in person site visits by Superintendent or COO

As you know, these opportunities are in addition to all of the other ways we have tried to hear the voices of stakeholders over the last several months. (See prior memo about Engagement that we provided to you (attached)). We are doing the work which you expect of us in your policies and in your guidance during Board meetings. What is clear is that the only voice they want you to hear is that of the AEA Board.

Third, it is inaccurate and offensive to say that I have not been in classrooms all year. While I do not pretend that my experience replicates that of our "on the ground" staff, I have tried to honor and respect our staff by going to schools, food drop-off sites, preschools and our remote learning centers even during the highest points of the pandemic. I have been proud to see how our team has worked to serve our kids and community throughout the pandemic.

Fourth, the asynchronous Friday discussion in their letter is bizarre and utterly offensive. As you know, from our student surveys, parent feedback and analysis of attendance, we have evidence that asynchronous Fridays may not be working well for our kids. In our February 8th letter to the whole community we identified the value of the asynchronous Fridays and provided notice that we were going to spend a month (with the input of AEA and teachers) exploring whether there is an alternative to our current practice given the concern for student impact. In response to this transparent and responsible discourse, the AEA Board demands that you stop that process and "designate" Fridays as planning days for the rest of the year. In short they demand that you ignore any evidence about impact to students, ignore the effort to get input from other teachers (such as the suggestion for an alternative structure made by one of the teachers who spoke last night) and ignore the voice of any other stakeholder. This position that we not consider student impact evidence and explore alternatives is fundamentally anti-student, anti-equity and anti-education. If this is the positioning of the AEA Board going forward it is unclear to me how they can be taken seriously in any conversation.

Finally, I have to comment on the slanderous way they discuss my decision-making process around COVID-19 safety protocols. I find this to be the most personally offensive comments they have made about me in eight years. (Keep in mind, that this also considers when one of their current leaders came to a Board meeting in 2019 and compared me to a Nazi sympathizer). In essence they accuse me of manipulating data and carelessly endangering the whole community in a reckless effort to open schools. This rhetoric would be laughable if it was not so dangerous. As you know (and as they know) our safety measures are informed by and comply with the health guidance from our local and state health agencies. Since March of 2020, we have anchored our work in the guidance of these entities. The leadership of Tri-County Health has met with you several times and directly with the entire AEA leadership group. Since the AEA Board does not like the answers they are getting from our local and state health experts, they are accusing me of being "selective" in our safety measures. This is quite simply a lie and needs to be identified as such. If I were to allow such a lie to go unanswered it would hurt APS' credibility in assuring the community about our science-based and data-driven efforts to keep everyone safe. While our understanding of COVID-19 continues to evolve and we see constant updates to health guidance and best practices, APS' efforts have been consistent in our commitment to follow the science as informed by our local health experts and our local data.

I recognize that this letter strikes a tone which I do not typically use. Over my time serving our community in this role I have worked productively with our teachers and staff to increase compensation, increase job satisfaction as reflected by our climate surveys, increase safety in our buildings, decrease

staff turnover; and most importantly, to improve student outcomes. I respect the fact that we will not always agree on how to get our work done. Moreover, I respect that people of goodwill and concern can and will disagree on how best to respond in these difficult times and may challenge decisions that have been made. But I firmly believe that if people come with the intent to serve this community, we can do amazing things. The AEA Board letter seems to be emblematic of a growing and intentionally divisive tone within AEA's Board (not necessarily its membership) and a desire to not have a genuine working relationship that benefits both staff and students. While I hope I am wrong and that we can return to a productive dialogue, I know we must be ready to counter such a destructive trend within AEA's Board because #APSFightsforKids.

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Wilcox, Bruce [CO]** <BWilcox@coloradoea.org>

Date: Mon, Feb 15, 2021 at 12:59 PM

Subject: letter to the APS School Board from the AEA Board of Directors

To: karmstrong-romero@aurorak12.org <karmstrong-romero@aurorak12.org>, kcox@aurorak12.org <kcox@aurorak12.org>, degerkin@aurorak12.org <degerkin@aurorak12.org>, mivey@aurorak12.org <mivey@aurorak12.org>, stephanie.mason@aurorak12.org <stephanie.mason@aurorak12.org>, nichelle.ortiz@aurorak12.org <nichelle.ortiz@aurorak12.org>, vicki.reinhard@aurorak12.org <vicki.reinhard@aurorak12.org>

To the Directors of the Aurora Public School Board of Education,

We write to express our frustration and concern. Since the Board of Education ceded control of COVID and learning model decisions back to Superintendent Munn he has forced through and rushed major changes without regard to concern from teachers, building leaders, and the community. Mr. Munn continues to misrepresent the voice of AEA and has not included the association in any decision making or solicited input since before winter break.

The district presented dubious data to you from a survey that gave no clear option for stakeholders to express actual concern. The survey methodology itself does not seem to disaggregate different groups, nor make any attempt to demonstrate a representative sample from its roughly 2,000 responses. This survey had a very narrow focus which did not allow educators to truly express our needs or concerns. It feels like this survey was presented in a way for the district to gather data that reinforced the message and plan they already were preparing to execute. This survey design would not receive a passing grade in a high-school statistics class, so why is it being used to make life and death decisions?

Mr. Munn has made it clear for months that he is uninterested in anything other than getting students back in school as quickly as possible based on his “belief” that students are safest in schools, without considering the impacts on educators, their families, or the broader community. He continues to seek out only information, resources, and experts that reinforce his “belief” even when the science, best practices, and voices from stakeholders disagree.

You have made it clear to Mr. Munn that input and involvement in planning by teachers in these decisions is an ongoing expectation. Yet, he continues to ignore our input, decline to engage us in decision making, and be deceptive in his characterizations of “collaboration” with the Association. These issues are relevant to items in his evaluation. If you do not hold him accountable to the expectations you set, and those defined in his evaluation, he will continue to ignore the duly elected leaders of this district. The AEA Board stands unified that you, the B.O.E., take back this “instructional autonomous decision making” and return community and stakeholder voice to the decision making process.

Additionally, the Association insists that you designate Fridays as continued asynchronous learning days for the remainder of the school year and reaffirm that Fridays are intended for teacher planning and preparation. Most of us are doing two jobs at the same time right now - teaching online and in-person. Last week Mr. Munn asked AEA to provide teachers to serve on a working group to provide input on Fridays remaining asynchronous. Will he actually listen to our input which will convey that having Fridays to continue to plan for two modalities of learning while reinventing everything we teach weekly is crucial to our success? Or has the decision already been made and our participation will only serve to allow Mr. Munn to claim that there was “collaboration” with teachers? When will you hold him accountable for listening to the people who are actually in schools when he has not been in classrooms all year? Why is he not listening to his many building administrators who agree that asynchronous Fridays are vital to our work this year? Rigorous, equitable instruction in this situation requires far more planning and reflection time than normal. Teachers in elementary schools have had to change their schedules numerous times already this year to accommodate the virtual, hybrid, and cohort models. These constant changes have overwhelmed teachers, students, parents, and community members unnecessarily. You must protect this time to allow us to effectively do our jobs.

Finally, we insist that you reverse your changes to the B.O.E. meeting schedule, returning to bimonthly meetings and no longer limiting public comment. In the time between your last meeting and your upcoming meeting the district will have totally changed our learning model and implemented it without opportunity for the public to weigh in on the issue or hear from the Board. Currently, according to the B.O.E. website, public comment is limited to ten people per meeting; this is unacceptable. When this board was seated you made transparency and accountability a priority, but in the past few months you have become increasingly opaque and inaccessible to the public in a time when extremely consequential decisions are being made. We hope we can count on you returning to more collaborative and transparent practices.

Sincerely,

The Aurora Education Association Board of Directors

Bruce Wilcox

President

Aurora Education Association