



April 9, 2021

Re: Setting the Record Straight

On April 6, 2021, the Palisades Park Board of Education issued a statement to the community regarding the ongoing contract negotiations process. The statement is both erroneous and misleading.

Fact: The negotiations process has dragged on for over two years due to the Board's unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.

- The PPEA's Negotiations Team sent an email to the Board of Education on October 15, 2018, in order to commence negotiations. Several emails were sent by the team in the weeks and months that followed but the emails were neither acknowledged nor responded to by the Board of Education. A response by the Board was finally received by the PPEA in late January of 2019, over three months after the initial email from the PPEA.
- On January 31, 2019, the Board agreed that a negotiation meeting would be held on February 13, 2019. Five days later, the Board of Education cancelled the meeting and informed the PPEA that they were not going to be prepared to meet until they had completed negotiations with the administrators of the district.
- Finally, the PPEA and the Board of Education met on March 13, 2019, for the very first time. At this point, the Board had already delayed the initiation of negotiations for five months.
- At the March 13, 2019, meeting, both parties agreed that each side would exchange proposals on April 12, 2019. It was further agreed that the proposals were to include all items each party wished to discuss during negotiations. Despite this agreement, the Choi Law Group, hired by the Board of Education in August of 2019, has continually brought new items to the table, consciously violating the guidelines agreed to by both parties and destroying any progress that has been made.

Fact: The Board of Education has flagrantly disrespected the PPEA's negotiations and leadership teams as well as the state appointed mediator.

- After no progress was made between the parties, a state appointed mediator was invited to help the PPEA and the Board reach a resolution. However, the mediation process was sabotaged by the Board almost immediately. In November of 2019, Board of Education members John Mattesich, Stephanie Jang, and Jeffrey Woo stormed out of a state monitored mediation session before the meeting ever began. The mediator was running late because he was in a car accident. The mediator arrived five minutes later to discover that the Board members had chosen to leave rather than stay and negotiate. Clearly, the Board has no respect for the PPEA or the state appointed mediator.
- Having further deteriorated, the negotiation process entered the Fact Finding stage. Fact Finding meetings in March and October of 2020 proved useless as the Board of

Education showed up unprepared with little to nothing related to the matter at hand. Ms. Jang was the only Board member who even bothered to attend the October meeting.

- In yet another display of disrespect, at the conclusion of the January, 2020 Board of Education meeting, Board member John Mattesich yelled at and attempted to intimidate the PPEA's Chief Negotiator, Lee Musler in front of the entire Board. This is unacceptable conduct.
- Finally, Ben Choi, the lead lawyer for the Board of Education, has not met or spoken with the PPEA's negotiations team and has refused to speak with the NJEA since a state-mandated Fact Finding meeting in October 2020.

Fact: The Palisades Park Board of Education has no interest in fiscal responsibility or improving the teaching and learning conditions in Palisades Park. They are enmeshed in the same culture of corruption that sadly characterizes the municipal government of Palisades Park.

- In the Board of Education's statement to the community, they refer to the failure of the referendum that was voted on in November, 2019. The suggestion is that it is the community that is disinterested or disinclined to improve school facilities. This is particularly outrageous as both former and current Board members publicly campaigned against past school budgets and the referendum held in November, 2019. Instead of advocating for improving the schools, they campaigned against the very referendum that would have provided them with the resources to improve the schools.
- Further demonstrating the flagrant disregard for fiscal responsibility, the Board of Education has paid the Choi Law Group over \$100,000 in legal fees between August, 2019 to the end of 2020.

Fact: The PPEA and the Board of Education reached an agreement regarding salary, benefits, and sick day payouts in February, 2021.

- Despite the Board's disrespect and unwillingness to negotiate in good faith, in November 2020, the PPEA reached out to the Board to see if they would be willing to meet with only negotiations team members present from each party in an attempt to come to an agreement. Progress was made following the Board of Education's reorganization in January of 2021 and in late February of 2021 the terms of a settlement were agreed to.
- The statement issued by the Board of Education alleges that the negotiations have not been concluded because the PPEA continues to make unreasonable salary and benefits demands. This is a lie. Salary and benefit issues were already agreed to.
- It is the intervention of the Choi Law Group that has made it impossible for the contract negotiations to end. The Choi Law Group insists on altering the terms of the deal that were already agreed to.
- Finally, it is important to note that the teachers in Palisades Park are among the lowest paid in all of Bergen County. The suggestion that the PPEA is making demands that would result in teachers earning salaries that are in the "upper echelons" of Bergen County is absolutely false.

Fact: Contract language regarding sick day payouts was inserted at the insistence of the Board of Education in 2010.

- Sick day payout language was bargained by the Board of Education in 2010. It was an attempt to encourage the most experienced, and consequently the most well-paid teachers, to retire. In fact, Board member John Mattesich was part of the Board negotiations team that insisted on its inclusion in the contract.
- In 2015, the sick day payout language was changed during the negotiations process, resulting in a tiered system, decreasing the number of teachers that could benefit from the payout.

- In the current negotiations, the demand that the language be removed was not part of the Board's initial proposals and should not even be part of the ongoing negotiations. Despite this, the PPEA agreed to new language in February of 2021, but now the Board insists that sick day payout language be removed entirely and is holding the agreement hostage until this demand is met.

Fact: On Wednesday, March 24, 2021, after twenty-nine months of disrespect and bad faith bargaining, the Palisades Park Education Association was forced to take a vote of no confidence in the Palisades Park Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools. Unfortunately, the Board of Education and its legal counsel continue to refuse to accept the terms and conditions of an agreed upon settlement, as the two parties try to sign off on a memorandum of agreement. Contract negotiations could immediately come to an end if the Board of Education simply accepts the terms that have already been agreed to.

Sincerely,

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PPEA Co-Presidents

Lee Musler
PPEA Vice President and Negotiations Chair

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