

Dear Shrewsbury School Committee and Our Shrewsbury Community,

We, the educators and community members of the town of Shrewsbury, believe that our district's current reopening plan as it was presented to the school committee clearly puts our health, our students' health, and the health of each of our immediate families at risk. It also fails to address the implications for staff or parents with regard to childcare and the potential ripple effect on our daily lives if it moves forward. We recognize that those involved in creating this plan have been hard at work doing so with a great deal of pressure and very minimal guidance from state leadership, as well as performing other work to address the impact of the pandemic on our school district, but we feel we would be remiss if we did not voice our concerns about the health and safety of our workplace and other consequences of this plan. While we understand this is not the final iteration of the reopening plan, and that there will likely be changes and more details hammered out over the coming weeks, we are writing this letter on the assumption that this will be the general model moving forward, since it is now mid-August.

Recent studies suggest that older children (ages 10-19) are essentially adults for epidemiological purposes, and spread the virus just as well as adults over the age of 19, even if they are less at risk for severe outcomes ([See this New York Times article for coverage of one study](#)). While we may be able to largely shape student behavior regarding virus mitigation practices while they are physically in school, it is another story outside of school. Recent outbreaks in Massachusetts have involved high school-aged students attending parties, sports camps, and other irresponsible gatherings ([see this Boston Herald article](#)). At our own "last ride" for the class of 2020, we observed many cars packed full of unmasked students who did not live in the same households as one another, so we already know that many of our recent graduates are not practicing good virus mitigation habits when left to their own devices. It is also worth noting that despite the widely circulated idea that young children do not transmit Covid-19 as well as adults, recent studies suggest this may not be true ([see this Chicago Tribune article](#)). In fact - with the reopening of schools around the country, [the CDC recently confirmed](#) a steady increase in Covid-19 cases in children. In addition, although it does seem to happen very rarely compared to adults, children are suffering severe complications (such as [MIS-C](#)) and even death from Covid-19 ([See this U.S. News and World Report article](#)), with [Massachusetts among the three hardest hit states for MIS-C](#) in children. Our district's plan seems to offer no consideration for these factors, and has instead gone with a hybrid model for all ages, which one Harvard epidemiologist called "among the worst" options for reopening schools in a [recent interview with WGBH's Joe Mathieu](#).

With regards to our older students, the current plan would likely have our high school and middle school educators teaching classes of 15 or so students each, 5 times a day for 45 minutes at a time, across two different cohorts of students in a given week. For our elementary teachers, while the current hybrid plan leaves our educators with smaller groups of students, it does so with constant exposure to these groups for 6-7 hour periods of time each day. This doesn't even address our concerns about potential half-day students, in which situation our teachers would be exposed to double the amount of students given that they will be teaching two separate sessions each day. Although this contact would in theory be primarily from a 6 foot distance while everyone is wearing masks, the poor ventilation of our classroom spaces (including temperatures that have measured above 90 degrees on certain days within a building with only MERV-8 filtration, and not [the CDC and ASHRAE recommended MERV-13](#) filters that can effectively capture the virus) and the day-to-day randomness of the classroom environment will impede the effectiveness of planned safeguards. Aerosol spread of the coronavirus seems likely if an infected individual is present in any of these classrooms. There is increasing global consensus that aerosol transmission is occurring, and may even be the primary culprit behind so-called "superspreader" events worldwide (for a good overview on this, [read this article in The Atlantic](#)). This doesn't even factor in any potential teacher duties, communal use of the hallways, shared bathrooms (in which [transmission via "plumes"](#) created by flushing toilets is a large concern), shared lunch spaces, and other instances which would increase the risk of viral spread. When you add it all up, a reasonable estimate would indicate that our middle and high school teachers will be exposed to roughly the same amount of people that they are during a "normal" week of school (hundreds), and for long enough time periods to constitute "close contact," putting each of our teachers at great risk. This doesn't even take into account any of our specialist teachers whose exposure far exceeds the average caseload. Much of our district's plan focuses on physical disinfecting and other "hygiene theater" measures that do not actually prevent much virus spread, yet cost time and money ([see this article also from The Atlantic](#)).

Since there were no details in the plan about required Covid-19 testing, outdoor teaching space, or Covid-specific HVAC upgrades, the plan favors teaching arrangements that do not effectively isolate students into stationary classroom pods or weekly cohorts, and the plan seems to ignore data on increased viral spread among children ages 10-19. We believe that this is a recipe for an outbreak which seriously jeopardizes the health of our staff and students in a way that many of us could never have imagined. The latest data showed [Shrewsbury](#) having 18 new cases in the past two weeks (which is an increasing trend from the 16 individuals who tested positive in the two weeks prior, and the 11 who tested positive in the two weeks prior to that) and the [state of Massachusetts](#) having an average of 247 new cases per day over the last two weeks (with individual daily numbers over 375 per day within only the last week). It is important to note that Shrewsbury has not ended community spread of the virus, but rather appears to be part of an increasing trend. Even if Shrewsbury does manage to have no new cases before school opens, neither it nor the state of Massachusetts is an island in our country in which cases continue to grow at an alarming rate. We have educators and students who live not only in other towns, but in other states - including some from Rhode Island, [which currently has a travel restriction](#) due to their high Covid-19 rate. While the reopening plan does have some details about situations in which staff and students might have to quarantine or be tested for Covid-19, these procedures are murky at best, and *seem to acknowledge that this hybrid plan will indeed result in positive Covid-19 cases within our school community*. We believe too much of the focus on Covid-19 centers on the falsehood that there are three true outcomes of an infection: asymptomatic infection, infection and recovery, and death. In reality, many people who have “recovered” from the virus are experiencing serious continued effects on their health, and the jury is still very much out on how permanent and debilitating these effects are. ([Here is an article from Science Magazine that addresses this issue](#)).

Many of our teachers have children in school or other childcare providers in the state that has been closed since mid-March. Some may reopen, some will remain closed, and many of our children attend schools with hybrid or remote learning models. Educators and parents in this district may be left hanging at the last minute, and will be scrambling to find childcare. The current plan does nothing to address the reality of pandemic childcare issues of staff or our students' parents in the district. Whether our district pushes forward with the hybrid model in its current iteration or changes course in the coming weeks, childcare will be an issue that many educators and parents will have to deal with, and with very short notice given the delay in an announcement of a full, formal plan. We do not believe that we as educators can effectively meet the needs of our students whether we are remote or hybrid if we and our students' parents do not have childcare. In addition, the necessity for at least a few days of childcare under a hybrid plan [widens each child's personal circle of exposure](#), thus exponentially increasing the risk for every educator, family member, or student who they then come into contact with. While we do not believe that it is necessarily the role of an employer to aid with employee childcare needs under normal circumstances, this is a once-in-a-century pandemic that needs policies and solutions that take that into account.

All of this means that the current plan for reopening leaves many teachers and parents with some terrible choices to make, and very little time to figure them out - before even considering the added condition that any plans we make might be upended at any time as new information comes to light given the many "missing puzzle pieces" in our district's reopening plan. What should we do if this unsafe plan proceeds? How can we ensure safety in buildings that do not comply with recommendations? Should we get tested for Covid-19 every day before we come home from work to save our families from our immense exposure? Is that even possible? If it is, how will we pay for it? Should we just separate ourselves from our family within our own houses each day when we come home from work? How would that affect each of our educators' mental health or their family's long-term well being, even if it might protect them from Covid-19 in the short-term? What should we do if our childcare doesn't open or has to suddenly close? If it does open, should we pull our kids out of our childcare to protect the other families who utilize it from our exposure? Or should we take FMLA, a temporary band-aid that in turn increases economic strife, especially considering our pay freeze this year? What if we aren't eligible for FMLA because of a previous leave? How do we keep our families safe?

While we don't have the solutions to all of these problems (and we don't think anyone does), We humbly offer the following suggestions to address some of these concerns and increase the safety and well-being of our students, educators, and Shrewsbury families:

- The first idea is to hold an open public forum on the school reopening plan with the members of the Central Office team, School Committee, and other relevant parties so members of the public and employees can ask questions and make comments about the plan in a democratic setting.** Since the document outlining the details of the hybrid plan was not released until August 6 (the day of the School Committee meeting during which it was approved), the plan was essentially approved without any real chance at public comment from students, parents, or educators. While there were two public comments made at the start of the meeting, anyone who wanted to make a truly informed public comment about the specifics of the plan would have had to read the entire 89 page plan while watching the presentation at the meeting, and then email Chairperson Fryc during the meeting and ask to comment before the meeting ended. Similarly, the panel of medical experts who spoke during a previously held webinar and answered questions only answered *a few* questions of the many that were submitted via Google Survey, with no additional information relayed following its conclusion. It is true that staff and families did have opportunities to submit general concerns and questions related to reopening in Google Surveys over the past several months, but it is hard to tell if these ideas were seriously considered since there was no open and deliberate attempt at seeking and responding to public comment in a more accessible manner. It is also difficult to submit questions and concerns regarding a plan which we know nothing of, and so many questions have gone unasked while waiting for more details.
- The school district should seriously consider opening with fully remote instruction to start, with both students and teachers participating from the safety of their own homes, and then providing a phased approach to opening to limited in-person learning,** whereby students with severe special needs would be the first to access some sort of in-person learning, and then younger students (though we caution that the most current science on this particular point would need to be consulted, as there is currently inconclusive evidence, at best, as to whether younger students actually do transmit less than adults), and then older students. When the educators of SPS were surveyed last week, 63.9% of teachers indicated that a remote plan was favorable to the current hybrid plan. Just over 40% indicated that without a remote approach, they would be considering a leave of absence, with 62.6% of those considering a leave citing their health and safety as the main concern. The ideal remote plan with a phased in return **would be tied directly to public health metrics** regarding new cases **within Shrewsbury and the surrounding communities**, as well as within the state of Massachusetts and the country as a whole. This would also allow us more time to assess relevant research on a disease that has only existed for about 8 months. Remember when masks weren't recommended just a few short months ago? Our understanding of the virus is constantly changing, and it doesn't make sense to turn our school district into a science experiment to further that understanding.
- If a phased reopening seems "too cautious," we offer the following suggestion with same caution noted in the previous suggestion - that the most current science should be consulted and a greater amount of evidence provided on the topic of transmission within younger age groups, as there is currently inconclusive evidence, at best, as to whether younger students actually do transmit less than adults. **If this can be proven beyond reasonable doubt, we suggest to reopen with students under age 10 in-person in small, isolated pods, and have older students learn remotely with easily accessible options for in-person extra help in small groups.** This would allow for more building space to be used to spread out younger students throughout the district, and potentially even as space for some sort of childcare for Shrewsbury parents and teachers who have children that are not yet school-aged. This type of split by age level is the crux of a plan put out by Cambridge Public Schools (along with some other ideas worth considering [that you can check out here](#)). This would honor the ideas expressed by the panel of medical experts in the webinar a few weeks ago, that younger kids in particular need to be in school for their social and emotional wellbeing, while addressing the reality that older kids are more likely to spread the virus due to their physical similarities to adults and their social habits. Last spring's remote learning model could most aptly be described as "emergency learning", and the fact that that three month's experience has been widely held up as proof that online learning is a "disaster" ([in the words of one Worcester Telegram and Gazette columnist](#)) ignores the many successful and robust online courses, colleges, and even our own "Virtual High School" program at SHS that have shown how online learning is a viable option. Many of our high school students already participated in online learning prior to the pandemic, and many who graduate go on to take online courses. This is also very common among our teachers, and a number of us can personally attest from graduate courses we have taken in recent years that these online courses tend to be more robust in

their expectations for student work and depth of learning. We believe our staff is up for the challenge of creating a robust, worthwhile online learning experience for our students, but this will require extensive planning and training which we should begin immediately - and not wait until after the hybrid plan fails to scramble to do so. A well planned remote program can be equal to if not better than a hastily planned hybrid in which regular interruptions (staff requiring leave for childcare or sick family, quarantine interruptions, staff mandated absences for any cold or flu like symptoms, etc.) will diminish the quality of a student's education.

- If a hybrid model truly is in the best interest for everyone, **there should be some clear evidence to support this.** In our research, we have been unable to find evidence in favor of this model. From what we have found, when considering only individual hybrid models, the **“week on/week off” style model ([a la Grafton Public Schools](#)) seems to make the most sense in terms of limiting the potential for the virus to spread within the inherently risky hybrid model.** This would effectively separate students in each school into two large cohorts which would never attend school in the same week. These cohorts could then be separated into classes or pods that stick largely together, with teachers switching rooms. Yes, this would require restructuring of schedules, and perhaps even blending of different leveled classes (such as A-level and Honors) at the high school level, but if health and safety is truly the number one priority, these seem like worthy compromises in order to provide safeguards against viral spread.
- The reopening document stated that MERV 8 - MERV 13 filters are used across our school buildings, and that adequate ventilation could be achieved with what was already in place at most schools, with the incorporation of such procedures as allowing teachers to open their classroom windows. [The American Society of Heating, Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Engineers recommends MERV 13 filters at a minimum to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2 particles spread through droplets, and HEPA filters to reduce the spread of airborne viral particles.](#) While we suspect that some of our school buildings are more deficient in this regard than others (with the greatest risk coming from Beal), most of them will likely need upgrades or flexible accommodations in order to safely host classes this fall. **At a minimum, all buildings should be equipped with filters rated at MERV 13 or higher and standalone HEPA filtered air purifiers should be considered for all classrooms that will host students. In addition, we believe that the absolute best thing we can do to allow for safe in-person instruction this year is to encourage and support the teaching of class outdoors as much as possible - but only to the extent at which this is feasible, given the rise of EEE in Massachusetts.** This has been done before to combat disease in American schools, even in cold weather ([see this New York Times article](#)), and would seem to create the lowest risk environment possible for viral spread during this pandemic ([see this article from Medium's “Elemental” for more information on outdoor transmission](#)).
- **Any sort of in-person learning this year cannot take place without extensive planning and “wargaming” to prepare for any possible scenario that could come up,** especially with regard to day-to-day operations that we all used to take for granted. These include, but are not limited to: arrival and dismissal, bus guidelines, student carpool guidelines, passing time, use of bathrooms, use of the nurse's office, distribution of PPE for staff and students, active shooter, fire, evacuation, and lockdown procedures, blowing one's nose or taking a drink of water, specifics around state-recommended “mask breaks”, and of course, eating lunch (for both students and staff). We understand that many of these details are still being worked out, but for us, these “pieces of the puzzle” are among the most essential in planning for a safe return to school, and the lack of information surrounding each causes great anxiety and concern.

We hope that you, and anyone else who has the power to set district policy, will consider the above along with any other scientifically backed measures and creative and flexible solutions to ensure that our Shrewsbury educators feel they can effectively educate the children of Shrewsbury this year without sacrificing the health or economic well-being of themselves and their own families. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Many Educators and Families of Shrewsbury Public Schools
Signed below by 117 SPS Educators, Staff, and Families

Signatures of Support:

Natalie Amaral	Teacher
Elizabeth Anderson	Teacher
Jason Andreola	Teacher
Kathleen Barnes	Teacher
Anne Beaupre	Teacher
Curt Bellemer	Teacher
Gabriela Belliveau	Teacher
Sara Biadasz	Teacher
Jessica Bisbee	Teacher
Brooke Blenkhorn	Teacher
Emily Bredberg	Teacher
Matthew Brown	Teacher
Cathy Burke	Teacher
Michael Burke	Teacher
Bridgit Burke-Smith	Teacher
Brady Burton	Teacher
Noreen Camerato	Teacher
Teresa Canney	Teacher
Jill Carter	Teacher
Nicole Cormier	Teacher
Jennifer Cuddy	Teacher
Sarai Dancy McKenna	Teacher
Carey Davis	Teacher
Samantha DiReda	Teacher
Elin Dolen	Teacher
Vanessa Duffy	Teacher
Caitlin Early	Teacher
Donna Ferris	Teacher
Kimberly Fitzgerald	Teacher
Yusra Khan	Teacher
Katie Knott	Teacher
Laurie Krueger	Teacher
Jennifer Lambert-Peloquin	Teacher
Kelly Lawlor	Teacher
Jess Linsey	Teacher
Gretchen Martinez	Teacher
Sinead Meaney	Teacher
Yuan Meng	Teacher
Ryan Middlesworth	Teacher
Stacey Militello	Teacher
Lisa Millett	Teacher
Becky Moisan	Teacher
Brianna Mondello	Teacher
Rosa Montalvo	Teacher

Andrew Moran	Teacher
Wendy Moran	Teacher
Melinda Moynihan	Teacher
Anne Murphy	Teacher
Talene Orlando	Teacher
Hannah Pageau	Teacher
Catherine Phillips	Teacher
Susana R. Pierce	Teacher
Derek Pizzuto	Teacher
Kimberly Plourde	Teacher
Sarah Powers	Teacher
Jessica Rigberg	Teacher
Kathryn Roberts	Teacher
Sharon Roland	Teacher
Shannan Rowell	Teacher
Denise Satterfield	Teacher
Timothy Scheer	Teacher
Michele Simler	Teacher
Laura Spangenberg	Teacher
Marc Spisto	Teacher
Michael Stack	Teacher
Ryan Stoens	Teacher
Sophie Straubel	Teacher
Serenity Sullivan-jacques	Teacher
Zac Tashjian	Teacher
Shawn Thomas	Teacher
Heather Thompson	Teacher
Kate Tinsley	Teacher
Patricia Quinn	Teacher
Lindsay Ventura	Teacher
Sarah Williams	Teacher
Robert Wilson	Teacher
Paul Wood	Teacher
Stephanie Halacy	Teacher, SPS Parent
Maureen Martin	Teacher, SPS Parent
Guinevere Molina	Teacher, SPS Parent
Carol Virzi	Teacher, SPS Parent
Evan Earls	Teacher, Other Staff
Gillian Litchfield	Teacher, Other Staff
Sue Donofrio	Other Staff
Joanne MacLaughlin	Other Staff
Tiffany Vega	Other Staff
Sharon Wade	Other Staff
Marie Middlesworth	Other Staff, Community Member
Susan Amdur	Paraprofessional
Katherine Campbell	Paraprofessional

Jillian Cronin	Paraprofessional
Julianna Murray	Paraprofessional
Bonnie Pierce	Paraprofessional
Renee Solis	Paraprofessional
Darlene Walsh	Paraprofessional
Shelley Crowell	Paraprofessional, SPS Parent
Jill Shah	Paraprofessional, SPS Parent
Neil Crowell	SPS Parent
Shari Harding	SPS Parent
Kathryn Hibbert	SPS Parent
Erin Melhuish	SPS Parent
Sara Port	SPS Parent
John Salvi	SPS Parent
Brenda Salvi	SPS Parent
Amy Slicer	SPS Parent
Julie Viscardi-Smalley	SPS Parent
David Hibbert	SPS Parent, Community Member
Steve Knox	SPS Parent, Community Member
Jason Martin	SPS Parent, Community Member
Jason J Port	SPS Parent, Community Member
Leone Reid	SPS Parent, Community Member
Karen Esteves	Shrewsbury Community Member
Jennifer McAlinden	Shrewsbury Community Member
Gareth McAlinden	Shrewsbury Community Member
Jayne Mehne	Shrewsbury Community Member
Eileen Melican	Shrewsbury Community Member
Brad Middlesworth	Shrewsbury Community Member