

Norwood Parent Letter to School Committee
April 4, 2017

Good evening. We are parents from the Norwood Elementary School PTA, and tonight we are speaking to you, the members of the school committee, because we have grave concerns about the hazardous conditions not only in Norwood but also in the rest of the Warwick Public Schools. We expect you to do your job, which is to take the appropriate actions to rectify these conditions and to hold accountable the administrators who are responsible for them.

We understand that the state of the fire safety system at Norwood and other Warwick schools is not the direct result of the current administration. This is the result of years of neglect. From the SMMA report, the estimated cost for repairs to fire alarms in all Warwick Schools was 1.7 million dollars. However, the estimated cost for the upgrade at Norwood was roughly \$86,000; the actual cost is \$125,000—a 45% increase in costs.

WPRI quoted Dr. Thornton as stating that Warwick Public Schools spent 3 million dollars to upgrade football fields, tracks, gym floors, entryways, and auditoriums. Why would money be spent on these projects while fire safety is not even addressed? Three million dollars would have ensured that no school had a fire alarm failure like we see at Norwood and Holliman. How can the citizens of Warwick approve a bond for the WPS to spend 85 million dollars on capital repairs? How can we trust that the money will first be spent on improving safety over appearances? Ask any parent or teacher here, and we will tell you that safety is more important.

The fire alarm systems at Norwood and Holliman were determined to have been dysfunctional on February 24, but according to the assistant fire chief, the failure could have happened any time between the last inspection in December and the discovery of the failure in February.

When the fire alarm was found to be broken, a fire watch was established in accordance

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with RILSC 9.6.1.6, with the supervision of the Warwick Fire Department. Why was this plan not recorded? Forgive us if we are not willing to accept a verbal agreement between Mr.

Gothberg, Fire Chief James McLaughlin, Fire Marshall Peter Marrietti and Superintendent of Fire Alarms Mike Moan. In speaking with each of these individuals, we have received differing accounts of what this approved fire watch entailed.

There either was or was not a requirement that there be a second custodian brought on to conduct the fire watch. The teachers were reported to all have walkie-talkies, which they did not. Because the parties involved in this fire watch agreement cannot agree on the details, how is anyone held accountable to the fire watch? If the authorizing parties of the fire watch cannot agree on the details, how could the principals and custodians of the schools effectively execute the fire watch as agreed?

Separate from the fire watch, which as far as we can tell involved a custodian conducting his regular custodial duties in addition to “smelling” and looking for fire, why was a back-up emergency plan not established? At Norwood and Holliman, the plan was to simply use the intercom as a fire alarm. However, a letter from RIDE dated July 27, 2009, clearly states as Point 4, “***The signaling device must be heard in all parts of the building and shall be used only for emergencies.***” At Norwood the intercom is not heard in all parts of the building. It is not heard in the restrooms or the sensory room in the annex. The intercom is not likely to be heard over music class or instrumental class. This appears to be a violation.

The intercom is used for other purposes beyond emergencies, and while we recognize that this was a stopgap measure, it does not comply with RIDE’s requirements for emergency drills. And, might we ask, what would have happened if power had been cut to the building? The intercom system would not work. The Voice over Internet Phones would not

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work. What if the fire were in the office where the intercom is located? In essence the schools would have been left with no emergency notification system. There were no additional safety measures put in place.

The letter from RIDE goes on to state in Point 19, “*All staff and students shall be informed of the school's evacuation plan and lockdown procedures.*” Here is a second violation. Staff and students of Norwood (and Holliman) were not notified to the extent of the breakdown in the current emergency system. Don’t you think that teachers, who are charged with the safety of their students, our children, should have been made aware that the fire alarm was broken? Had a fire broken out in a classroom, the teacher would have pulled the alarm. NOTHING would have happened. THIS IS NOT OK!

Norwood and Holliman students should have been notified that the emergency drills for which they had practiced had changed. Students in all grades practice lock down and fire drills; we certainly owe it to them to explain that the standard protocol is altered and that they must exercise additional caution. All occupants of the building should be notified of the change in protocol. It is unacceptable that they were not.

As you all know, parents are outraged that they were not notified. Warwick schools alert parents to matters of far less importance than the failure of a fire safety system—such as unsubstantiated rumors of a sick out, one-sided accounts of contract negotiations, Title One events, etc. There is no excuse that parents were not notified.

Rhode Island General Law 16-21-24 outlines the health and safety plan of pupils in Rhode Island Schools. The very first point calls for “appropriate prevention, mitigation, preparedness and intervention strategies...” We are quite certain that a change in circumstances would require a change in said strategies. The failure of the fire alarm systems would have been

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an excellent opportunity for the School Safety and Crisis team to develop an alternative safety plan.

Rhode Island General Law 16-21-23 speaks of School Safety and Crisis teams. The failure of a fire alarm system seems to us to be a safety crisis. Was the School Safety and Crisis team put into action to develop a back-up plan? Considering that the back-up safety plan was not delivered to teachers until MARCH 31 at 3:26 pm, and only after the urging of parents and teachers with repeated follow ups, we would have to say that Warwick Public Schools failed in this measure too. WPS has been incredibly irresponsible in its duties to protect students and staff and in notifying parents of safety issues within school buildings.

While we cannot go back and fix the gross mistakes and misconduct of Warwick Public Schools administrators, we can ask for the following changes going forward.

1. We want to ask for a communication process to be put in place notifying parents of safety issues within the school. There appears to be much confusion as to whom was responsible for notifying whom. The first people Dr. Thornton notified were the mayor and school committee chairperson. When contacted, the mayor's office initially informed PTA members that the fire alarm situation was out of his jurisdiction. Due to personal reasons, Furtado was not able to share this information with her fellow school committee members. The superintendent issued a press release regarding the failure of the fire alarms but not a notification to parents. The people most affected by this outage, the staff, students, and parents of Norwood and Holliman, were not officially notified of the failure until March 23, 2017 at 3:10 pm. **THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE**, and it must change.
2. We ask that a back-up safety protocol be developed either in advance of a failure or as

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soon as a failure is discovered. It should not take a month and the prodding of parents and teachers for administrators to do their jobs.

3. We ask for the resignation of Mr. Gothberg for his dismissal of the concerns of those in the building and the apparent disregard for the students of Norwood and Holliman School. We have no confidence that he has the safety of our children and the staff of our schools at heart. We should not have “to hammer” anyone to receive a back-up safety plan, and if he feels that is the case, shame on him! This is clearly not the job for him.
4. We ask for the resignation of the school administrator who stated on Facebook, and we quote, “Relax. When is the last time a school caught on fire? How about never.” Well, a quick Google search resulted in the following findings from the National Fire Protection Association:

From 2009-2013, U.S. fire departments responded to an estimated average of 5,100 structure fires in educational properties, annually... These fires caused an annual average of one civilian death, 79 civilian fire injuries and \$88 million in direct property damage.

This administrator went on to state, “Brick and stone doesn’t burn.” While he is correct that brick does not burn, it does absorb heat and is often backed up by wooden framing, which certainly burns. Furthermore, we all know that the contents of a brick building can and do burn. If an administrator can be so flip and misinformed in the light of student safety, he has no role in public education. He must be let go immediately.

5. We call for the resignation of Dr. Thornton. Dr. Thornton has repeatedly told us that the buck stops with him, and yet he cannot provide the complete details of the failure of communication and back-up safety plans. He is in charge of the safety of our children, but he did not take control of this safety issue. We have no faith and no trust that keeping our children safe will be his top priority. When given control of 3 million dollars, he

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chose superficial projects rather than the core safety of his staff and students. His priorities are not our priorities. We have lost confidence in his ability to lead.

6. We ask that spending for all superfluous projects, such as the PR firm; website development, *which can and should be handled internally by the 10 Warwick School IT employees*; new fitness centers complete with whirlpool spas; new training fields at Toll Gate; and the HVAC system, electrical systems, and fire code upgrades at Gorton, be put on hold until you have repaired the fire safety system at every school in Warwick

The safety of the students in Warwick is paramount. Norwood parents will work tirelessly to ensure that changes are made at every level when it comes to fire safety. We ask that the school committee begin the process for immediate changes, but we will also be contacting the state fire marshal and our state legislators to address safety failure protocols and communication in schools. No parent should ever feel the fear and anxiety that we have in sending our children to school in an unprotected building.