

## **The Exorbitant and Unconscionable Number of Teacher Layoffs in the Warwick Public Schools**

Last week the Warwick Public Schools sent layoff notices to seventy-one (71) Warwick teachers. At its meeting on May 15, the Warwick School Committee (WSC) will be voting whether or not to lay off these teachers. The Warwick Teachers' Union is concerned about the negative impact that these layoffs will have on the education of the children of Warwick and urges the WSC for the sake of the students to vote their consciences and not approve these layoffs.

Although some of these proposed layoffs are the result of the closing of three elementary schools and the moving of the sixth-grade students to the junior highs to make them middle schools, many are not due to this consolidation, are gratuitous, and represent draconian cuts in elementary programs. The superintendent claims that these layoff notices are necessary in case he does not get the money from the city that he is requesting in his budget. However, he has no concerns about funding when he continues to create administrative positions and provide upgrades to the administration building. The WSC and the superintendent are once again using the teachers and students as pawns in a game with the Warwick City Council. The WSC and the superintendent are the ones who have proved themselves to be untrustworthy and are responsible for their poor relationship with the City Council. The situation in Warwick is unfortunate, and while the Warwick Teachers' Union (WTU) is in support of the district's receiving the funds necessary to run the schools, the WTU cannot undo the wrongs that the WSC and its administration have done over the years. They alone have to broker peace.

Meanwhile, the children of Warwick continue to suffer because of the proposed cuts in programs, especially at the elementary level. Some of the cuts in the elementary schools are as follows:

**--Elimination of Elementary Science.** In the early 1960s in response to Sputnik and the "Space Race," Warwick Public Schools implemented an elementary science program through which students would receive science instruction from elementary teachers specially trained to provide science instruction. This program provided the elementary classroom teacher more time to dedicate to math and ELA instruction and gave the students an opportunity to develop a special relationship with science. Unfortunately, over the years the administration has reduced some of the time that students previously spent in these science classes, and now the superintendent is using this shortened time, in addition to his desire to cut teaching positions to save money, as an excuse to eliminate the program entirely. In the age of "STEM," there should be more science, not less.

**--Elimination of Elementary Math Interventionists.** Two years ago, the district created these teaching positions to provide elementary students with the concentrated instruction that they need to improve their numeracy skills. Despite the progress that the students have made in two short years and despite the WSC's April 2018 vote to restore the math interventionists, the superintendent is eliminating this program in its entirety,

**--Elimination of Elementary Guidance.** Last year the thirty-one (31) layoff notices that the school committee approved represented the elimination of the entire elementary guidance counseling program. Despite the outcry from teachers and parents, many who spoke publicly about the positive effects that these counselors had had on their children, the school committee voted for the layoffs and in effect eliminated the program. The excuse that the WSC and its administration always makes is that they have to lay off teachers because they don't know how much money they will get from the city. However, at this very same meeting, the WSC voted to spend \$600,000 on Promethean Boards for the high schools. That \$600,000 would have funded the elementary guidance counselor program. If they had to lay off teachers because they did not yet have money from the city, then they should not have spent money on the Promethean Boards. Fortunately, last summer the school committee made some cuts and restored one and a half guidance counselors for this past year, but they all will be gone next year.

**--Reduction of Reading Specialists.** Although the WSC is closing three elementary schools, they are eliminating four and a half reading specialists. Two years ago, the WSC went along with the superintendent's recommendation to eliminate the Reading Recovery program because doing so would allegedly allow for literacy instruction in Grades 4-6 in addition to instruction in Grades K-3. That instruction in Grades 4-6 did not happen, and now there are fewer and fewer reading specialists to provide literacy instruction for students in K-3. Grade 3 is the magic year; if a student is behind in Grade 3, the chances of that student being able to catch up in subsequent years are fewer and fewer. The district needs more, not fewer reading specialists and needs to restore the Reading Recovery program itself so that students in Grades K-5 can receive the literacy instruction that they need to become proficient readers and lifelong learners. Additionally, literacy instruction at the junior high/middle school level is still an issue due to the administration's poor decision a few years ago to eliminate teachers and reduce the amount of time students receive literacy instruction to three out of six days.

**--Reduction of Elementary Librarians.** Although the WSC is closing three elementary schools, they are eliminating four librarian positions. The extra layoff notice in this group shows that the administration does not know how to plan and that it is balancing its budget on the backs of the teachers and students.

In addition to the cuts at the elementary level that have resulted in the layoff notices to thirty-seven (37) elementary teachers, there have also been reductions at the secondary level in subjects such as English, business, art, and physical education. A few years ago, the district reduced physical education to one quarter of the school year at the high school level so the administration could eliminate physical education teachers. Because of the rate of childhood obesity, this district's leaders should be restoring physical education, not eliminating it so they can eliminate even more teachers. The other large number of layoff notices were to twelve (12) special educators. The remaining layoff notices went to three (3) reading specialists, to four (4) librarians, to teachers of various secondary content areas, and to a combination of elementary and secondary teachers of art, music, physical education, and English Language Learners.

Two years ago, the WSC, the superintendent, and the administration botched the consolidation of the secondary schools, and they have yet to repair the damage. Now they are about to create even more havoc with a consolidation plan that will adversely affect students at

all grade levels. They are disrupting people's lives and destroying the education of Warwick's students because they are playing budget games with the city. After two and half years of a protracted labor dispute, the WSC will not even honor the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) that they ultimately reached with the WTU. The CBA that all of the WSC members signed has provisions against the elimination of elementary school programs and language that governs the number of layoff notices that the district can send. By eliminating elementary programs and laying off teachers beyond the contractual limit, the WSC is violating a CBA on which the ink is barely dry. The WSC needs to instruct the superintendent to rescind the superfluous layoff notices, make peace with the City Council, and not attempt to balance his budget on the backs of Warwick's teachers and students.

Darlene Netcoh  
May 2018