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May 13, 2019

Ms. Annemarie Maini
President
South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education
525 Academy Street
Maplewood, New Jersey 07040

Re: Maplewood Middle School

Dear Ms. Maini:

I am writing to express support for a change in the building leadership of Maplewood Middle School. The stewardship of our schools, grades K-12, are the key to elevating the academic performance of all students and increasing the overall quality of our schools. The middle school years are critical in the development of students, as research shows. During a recent Black Parents Workshop fact-finding trip, on which we were accompanied by Dr. Ficarra and Board Member Wright, to P.S. 28 in Jersey City, a K-8 public school, we witnessed the effects of strong building leadership that has resulted in strong academic performance and an award-winning STEM program. Our children deserve the same.

In its recent school grading report, the state Department of Education assigned Maplewood Middle School a score of 33.63, putting the school in the 23rd percentile of schools. By comparison, South Orange Middle School, a school once on the state Focus Schools list, was

assigned a score of 63.65 in the 72nd percentile of schools. When examining the state school performance reports, there is also a significant achievement gap between white and Black students at Maplewood Middle School.

While state assessments are only a partial indicator of a school's performance and student achievement, they are nonetheless indicators that must be weighed in assessing the tenure of the school building principal. Any fair and objective evaluation of the status of Maplewood Middle School will conclude that the building has not been led up to expectations. These indicators suggest that a change in building leadership is necessary. Given the continued rhetoric and chatter in the community concerning closing the achievement gap, certain changes should come without controversy or hysteria. That is, if the interest of children is paramount.

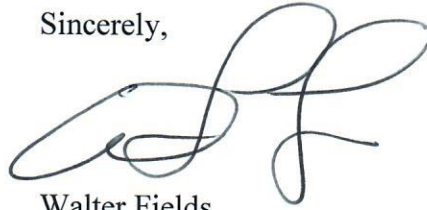
We are also aware of personnel and student incidents at Maplewood Middle School that cause us grave concern. The only way the district will return to a high performing modality is when the building leaders, staff and teachers are on the same page and all working with one singular goal – the success of all students who enter the school building. At some point, we must produce a team of educators that are on one accord as to their purpose for employment in the district. While some necessary personnel changes have been made over the last year, there is still room for improvement.

Our focus is on strong building leadership, no matter the race or gender of the education professional. We are not beholden to support any administrator or teacher simply based upon the race or gender of the individual. Our focus is on what's in the best interest of students. We do believe there are qualified and capable candidates of color who are capable of taking on the task of transforming Maplewood Middle School into a model school. We hope such a candidate will be identified.

Children in our district have been underserved for too long and for too long adults have escaped being held accountable. There are vivid examples across the country of thriving schools, led by dynamic leaders who are motivated by the goal of transforming students into scholars and not accepting of low expectations. Our children deserve visionary leadership that embraces the

potential of all children and is fearless and uncompromising in pursuit of the best educational options for students. We are hopeful that a change in leadership in Maplewood Middle School will reinvigorate the school and benefit its students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Walter Fields', with a stylized, looping flourish at the end.

Walter Fields
Chairman

cc: Board Members
Dr. Thomas Ficarra