

July 29, 2019

Press Release:

RE: Serious Health Issues for Teachers and Parents of Sunset Lake Elementary /Vicksburg Community Schools:

Vicksburg Community Schools issued (4) public statements between March 2019 and June 2019 communicating to the public that there were no reasons for concern about the health or safety of students or teachers at Sunset Lake. The District has relied upon reports issued by its environmental consultant, “NOVA Environmental”, to insist that there are no health hazards present in the building, or any other cause for alarm. The teachers believe that these representations are untrue and incomplete.

On December 31st, 2018, a 31-year-old teacher, who had been experiencing migraines since beginning a new teaching assignment in an upper elementary classroom in the fall, had a stroke. The classroom was emptied on January 25th, thoroughly cleaned and carpets shampooed beginning of the week of January 28th. The room was then tested by NOVA Environmental on January 31st for air quality. The report concluded that there were no significant health hazards found in the room. Instead, Nova suggested that the teacher’s stroke and headaches may have been caused by the finger paint, glue and other regular classroom materials located under her sink, and/or due to a binder that she had placed on a part of the uni-vent system. Nova suggested that this binder blocked air flow. The teacher returned February 4th to resume teaching. On February 28th, she was hospitalized again for having another minor stroke resulting in a medical leave for the remainder of the year. The previous teacher in this same classroom also experienced debilitating migraines and resigned in the spring of 2018 due to permanent health conditions caused by the severity of her migraine attacks.

Following the strokes suffered by the 31-year-old teacher, several teachers of Sunset began sharing and compiling their own health data. As this data was gathered, the teachers began to see alarming similarities in their illnesses with the majority of the health issues occurring while teachers worked in the upper elementary hallways at Sunset Lake Elementary. The current summary of their consolidated health issues are as follows:

- 10 Hysterectomies
- 9 miscarriages
- 14 different teachers with Migraine headaches
- 20 cases of infertility, endometriosis and other reproductive issues
- 32 other significant issues including 2 strokes, repeated, chronic upper respiratory infections, and allergies experienced only while working in the building and asthma.

These illnesses are spread among 31 teaching staff members, 25 of which were working within the building during the 2018-2019 school year.

While the teachers were compiling their health issues beginning in March, unbeknownst to them, a group of parents from the Centennial neighborhood, whose children attend Sunset Lake

Elementary, were beginning to share stories of illnesses their own children were experiencing. These parents had independently began sharing their own children's illnesses by comparing reoccurring illnesses on the neighborhood Facebook page. Student illnesses included:

- Multiple cases of migraine headaches
- Chronic, repeated upper respiratory infections
- Multiple children within the same classrooms experiencing daily nosebleeds
- Rashes, and other non-seasonal allergy conditions

Since this initial data collection, teachers have also learned that some parents outside of the Centennial neighborhood, both during the 2018-2019 school year and during previous years, moved their students to other buildings within the District, or moved their students to neighboring districts after these students suffered excessive illnesses while attending Sunset Lake Elementary.

Administration has downplayed the seriousness and number of teacher health issues by relying upon the fact that the attendance record for teachers this past school year has been excellent. While this is a true statement, it is important to consider that any teacher that misses more than 2 days of school for illness can no longer be considered "highly effective" in the attendance portion of their evaluations. This ultimately impacts their total year-end evaluation scores. Because of this, and because of the conscientiousness and dedication of the teachers, they either drag themselves to work sick or, arrange to have their surgeries or other medical procedures during vacation breaks.

In an attempt to discover a cause for their illnesses, the teachers initiated a number of investigative steps, meetings with Administration and reached out to governmental agencies, to wit:

- Taken samples of ceiling insulation and coordinated with a local environmental firm to have their samples sent off to a qualified testing lab (IMS Laboratory) to be tested. Samples included insulation from two separate rooms and one ceiling cavity air sample. Test results came back positive for presence of mold in all three samples, the reports of which are attached to this press release. These test results were provided to Administration on March 26th of 2019.
- Demanded copies of all past air quality reports completed by Nova Environmental to review.
- Hired an independent environmental consultant (Wonder Makers Environmental) to explore links in their illnesses and potential sources. To date, Administration has refused to allow Wonder Makers to perform any testing or make an enhanced visual inspection of the building.
- Learned from the 2016 Nova Environmental report that Nova identified 9 classrooms with CO2 readings over 1,500 ppm; 2 of these had levels over 2,600 ppm. 6 of these rooms are located in the upper elementary hallway and the other three are located in the lower elementary hallway. Teachers in these classrooms were **not** notified of these elevated CO2

levels, and, in fact, did not become aware of this report until parents demanded the reports in March/April of 2019. Several recommendations given by Nova in their 2016 report were not followed by Administration:

- inspecting each uni-vent to ensure functioning properly (as proven by the fiberglass boards found inside the uni-vents late in this past school year, and which prohibited adequate airflow);
- regularly changing uni-vent filters; and
- removal of water damaged ceiling tiles.

- Photographed components throughout the building in March/April of 2019 where the naked eye would notice suspicious conditions: multiple portions of the metal ceiling; old skylights with visible signs of water damage; darkly colored areas where there appears to be substances leaking. Sunset Lake experienced extensive leaking between 2012 – 2015, until the roof was replaced.

- Enlisted their union, which met with Administration on March 26, 2019 and turned over over a 3” binder compiling the teachers’ medical issues, a parent petition with student medical issues, and photographs of depicting moldy insulation panels, stained carpeting, and the visible signs of water damage in the ceiling tiles.

- Emphasized with Administration that Nova had reported that the uni-vent systems, which are original to the construction of the building in 1950s/1960s, are outdated and well past their useful lives. A Nova Representative was clear that these units are seriously undersized given current building capacity and cannot be modified to increase performance sufficiently to supply classrooms with fresh air.

- Learned during spring break of 2019, that LaPine Mechanical, a mechanical contractor hired by the Administration, found “foam boards” in the outdated uni-vent systems, which only further compromised the performance of these units. This was this NOT checked in 2016 when Administration was told by Nova that the CO2 levels were elevated, despite Nova’s express recommendation that the uni-vents be inspected to ensure they were working properly.

- Sent their illness data to NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) in April of 2019 requesting a Health Hazard Evaluation. NIOSH has responded that it cannot mobilize sufficiently to investigate this matter until school is already back in session for the 2019-2020 school year.

- Sent their illness data to the Kalamazoo County Health Department after a Board Member stated at the March 28, 2019 School Board meeting, and after the Administration advised parents in a letter on April 10, 2019, that it had engaged the “chief medical examiner” for Kalamazoo County to look at the illness data it had received from the 3” binder.

- Sent their illness data to the Michigan Department of Health after the Kalamazoo Health Department advised in a letter that the teacher’s illnesses were “outside the role and capacity of the local health department.”

- Requested, through their union, that the Administration allow Wonder Makers Environmental to test for possible sources of contaminants, particularly since the teachers questioned the validity of NOVA testing when they realized that NOVA only tested for air quality after rooms were cleaned and sanitized, and/or windows were opened just before and during air quality testing. Administration only allowed Wonder Makers to make a brief visual, walk-through inspection of certain rooms. Wonder Makers Environmental's May 29, 2019 report following this walk-through inspection is attached.

- Asked the Administration to remove the moldy insulation from the ceilings. Administration has responded that since the insulation is above the steel ceiling panels, that they cannot access this insulation. However, teachers were able to access the ceiling insulation easily because Administration had previously cut a small hole in the ceiling panels in one classroom to expose a hornet's nest, and in another section to investigate the source of a dead animal smell. The teachers believe that the ceilings panels can be cut into and the insulation can be slid out of the ceiling of each classroom. The steel ceiling panels in each classroom and hallway have numerous perforations in them to allow for air flow from the spaces above the ceiling down to the classrooms (pictures of these perforated ceiling panels included in Wonder Makers May 29th, 2019 report.)

- Engaged further with NIOSH when it replied in May of 2019 to the teacher's submission. After this first phone conference during which teachers elaborated on the vast number of health issues being experienced by teachers and students, NIOSH moved Sunset's case from a level 2 desktop review to a level 3 site inspection. This is indicative of the seriousness of the issues at Sunset, which was confirmed by NIOSH during the second call between NIOSH and teachers when NIOSH agreed that the teachers were justified in their concern. Also, during this second call, NIOSH stressed the importance of addressing the issues with the uni-vents and stated that they were puzzled as to why the Administration has not address them yet despite having received NOVA's recommendation that it do so back in their 2016, and again through a Nova 2019 report.

- Monitored Board Meeting minutes through which they learned in May of 2019 that the Administration chose to pay a \$345,000 loan early, instead of using those resources toward uni-vent replacement and/or mold laden ceiling insulation. The teachers have heard that the Administration believes that replacement of the uni-vent systems will cost the district "\$2M." Based upon some preliminary research, the teachers believe that the replacement units would cost no more than \$7,000 each.

- Attended a meeting on the last day of the school year called by Assistant Superintendent Steve Goss during which he reported that the District had the resources to remove and replace the carpeting in 5-6 Sunset Lake classrooms. The teachers were asked to pick the rooms where this remedial work would be completed. Only when the teachers objected, and pointed out the absurdity of asking them to decide which teacher and set of students would return to a healthier classroom, did the Administration agree to remove and replace the carpeting in all Sunset Lake classrooms. In a follow-up email immediately after this meeting,

the Teachers reiterated their request that the mold laden insulation be removed from the ceiling, and that the uni-vents systems be replaced in each classroom, particularly since the Administration has known about the inadequacy and disrepair of the uni-vent systems since 2016. It is troubling to the teachers that the Administration opted instead to remove carpeting and floor tiles as this will require asbestos abatement as soon as the tiles are disturbed. Not only is this akin to suturing a gaping 20” wound with a 3” band aide, the teachers are not confident that the ventilation systems will be thoroughly cleaned and tested after the abatement by certified asbestos abatement professionals.

- Made a final request on July 1, 2019 through their union that the Administration remove the mold laden insulation and replace the uni-vent systems before the staff and students return to school in the fall. The Administration refused the request, opting instead to WAIT for NIOSH to visit in the fall and make recommendations. While the teachers acknowledge that carpet removal, which they have been requesting for years, may have a positive impact on the air quality in the building, it is not going to have near the remedial impact that replacing the uni-vent systems or removing moldy insulation would have in moving the building closer to becoming a safe and healthy learning environment for students and staff.

The teachers of Sunset Lake Elementary School cannot, in good conscience, return to school in the fall without making all of their efforts and the information they have gathered public so that parents can decide for their children whether they should return to Sunset Lake Elementary. It has become an ethical and moral dilemma for the teachers because, as stated above, they love their school and they have great respect for their community. It is axiomatic that they want students in their classrooms so that they can practice the craft that they have committed to as life-long careers.

In order to safeguard their own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of the children attending Sunset Lake, the teachers again ask the Administration to complete the following before staff and students return to Sunset Lake for the 2019-2020 school year:

- 1) Allow Wonder Makers to conduct an enhanced visual inspection of the building immediately, and as recommended in its May 29, 2019 report;**
- 2) Replace the uni-vents in each classroom;**
- 3) Remove/remediate the ceiling insulation that has tested positive for mold due to being saturated with water from several years of leaking roofs from at least 2012 to 2016 (and some current leaks);**
- 4) Allow Wonder Makers Environmental to return after completing items 2 and 3 in order to perform the necessary tests and measurements in the building to further rule out other building conditions contributing to illnesses of students and staff; and**
- 5) Complete a health survey of staff and students, either through NIOSH or independently if NIOSH is not able to mobilize by the beginning of the new school year.**

The supporting documents attached to this Press Release are as follows:¹

- 1) Cover letter sent to Lisa Quiggle, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Department on behalf of the teachers on May 24th, 2019. (Nearly identical cover letter sent to NIOSH on April 22, 2019 and Kalamazoo County Health Department on April 29th, 2019 with same attachments)
- 2) Letter from Wonder Makers Environmental included in the packet of documentation sent to NIOSH on behalf of the teachers on April 22, 2019 (similar letter sent to Lisa Quiggle of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services Department)
- 3) Summary of Sunset Lake Elementary Teacher Health Conditions and Symptoms
- 4) Building schematic of illnesses by classroom.
- 5) IMS Laboratory Report E129581 – Ceiling Insulation from Sunset Lake Elementary Class Room 411
- 6) IMS Laboratory Report E129733 – Ceiling Insulation from Sunset Lake Elementary class Art Room
- 7) IMS Laboratory Report E129581 – Petri dish mold test from Sunset Lake Elementary Class Room 411
- 8) Email sent to Karl Feldmann and Laura Reynolds of NIOSH disclosing teacher concerns with NOVA Environmental Reports/testing - Sent on May 28, 2019
- 9) Kalamazoo County Health Department’s response to teacher’s packet of information sent to them on April 29, 2019.
- 10) Email sent to Lisa Quiggle of State of Michigan introducing parents – Sent on June 11, 2019.
- 11) Wonder Makers Environment Report dated May 29, 2019, following brief walk-thru in limited number of classrooms.

¹ Many of the supporting documents have been redacted to protect the privacy of teachers.