

Michelle Phillippi

Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922

September 4, 2023

Berkeley Heights Public Schools
Attention: Dr. Melissa Varley and BH Board of Education
345 Plainfield Avenue
Berkeley Heights, NJ 07922

Dear Dr. Varley and Members of the BH Board of Education:

I am writing to you out of serious concern I have for the increase in class sizes within the district that are lacking proper support for both the teachers and the students. It is known large classroom sizes have a negative impact on both teachers and students and smaller class sizes are preferable for several reasons. Smaller student-teacher ratios allow teachers to have more one on one time and small groups. It helps to be able to assess children's development and learning, to identify and work on individual issues, and generally have more ability to manage the needs of the whole class. This leads to better outcomes for both teachers and students. In fact, there are state mandates in place to address such matters.

Currently the Board of Education Class Size Policy #2312 states that class sizes should be 15-20 students per class for grades K-1 and 17-22 for grades 2-5. While I understand the policy indicates that "unusual circumstances" may require deviation from these class size guidelines I am dismayed to find out that most class sizes in our district for the 2023-2024 school year are exceeding the recommendations by our board of education.

I presently have three children in the Berkeley Heights school district. My youngest child is in kindergarten at Mary K. McMillin with a class of 21 students and only one full time teacher. Regrettably and with little foresight one of our top-notch kindergarten educators, Ms. Lane, was dismissed by the district and Kindergarten was reduced from 4 sections to 3. This unfortunate decision resulted in an increase in class size but no increase in teacher support. Furthermore, there was no consideration for the influx of new students that will be registering due to the over development occurring in Berkeley Heights and more specifically the new apartments that have a direct impact on Mountain Park Elementary School and Mary K. McMillin Early Childhood Center.

Can you please answer the following questions:

1. What is being done to address this issue not only at MKM but across the entire district?
2. Dr. Varley, can you and the BOE justify exorbitant administrative salaries along with continued hiring practices in administration while slashing programs and teachers?

While I recognize the need for administration, I fully expect the administration and the BOE to hold itself to a standard of excellence by means of implementing fiscal responsibility, accountability and transparency to the students and families you and the board serve. Because at this point, I fear the administration and the BOE has veered off its path and the students are and will continue to suffer if these practices endure. Surely you do not need to be reminded it's the teachers that make the difference in a student's academic journey.

I am often reminded parent engagement is encouraged within the Berkeley Heights school district and to that point I would kindly request you include a copy of my letter and the response in the agenda of your next BOE meeting on September 14, 2023. I am also requesting that our district add an additional section and/or provide a full-time teacher or full-time aide specifically in my daughter's kindergarten class at Mary K. McMillin and all of the other classes that are impacted across our district.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. I look forward to your receipt confirming you received this letter along with a response informing me of the actions you and the BOE plan to take to address this pressing matter.

Sincerely,

Michelle Phillippi

CC: Members of BH Board of Education
Mrs. Angela Penna (apenna@bhpsnj.org)
Mrs. Joy Young (jyoung@bhpsnj.org)
Ms. Gale Bradford (gbradford@bhpsnj.org)
Mr. Robert Cianciulli (rcianciulli@bhpsnj.org)
Dr. Thomas Foregger (tforegger@bhpsnj.org)
Mrs. Dipti Khanna (dkhanna@bhpsnj.org)
Mr. Jordan Hyman (jhyman@bhpsnj.org)
Mrs. Pamela Stanley (pstanley@bhpsnj.org)
School Principals:
Mr. Robert Nixon (rnixon@bhpsnj.org)
Mr. Paul Kobliska (pkobliska@bhpsnj.org)
Mr. James Finley (jfinley@bhpsnj.org)
Mrs. Brenda Marley (bmarley@bhpsnj.org)
Mrs. Jessica Nardi (jnardi@bhpsnj.org)



Dr. Melissa Varley

Tuesday

To: Michelle Phillippi, Angela >

No Subject

Dear Ms. Phillippi;

Thank you very much for your email. I'm sorry to hear that you feel that 21 students is a large class. I'm sure your daughter will do very well with Mrs. Fischer. She is an amazing teacher.

Thanks,

Melissa Varley



From: [Michelle Phillippi](#) >
To: [Dr. Melissa Varley](#) >
Cc: [Angela Penna](#) > [Jordan Hyman](#) >
[gbradford@bhpsnj.org](#) >
[pstanley@bhpsnj.org](#) >
[jyoung@bhpsnj.org](#) > [Thomas Foregger](#) >
[dkhanna@bhpsnj.org](#) >
[rcianciulli@bhpsnj.org](#) >
September 7, 2023 at 3:03 PM

Re:

Dr. Varley,

Thank you for your response to my letter addressed to you and all Berkeley Heights School Board members, however in your response, you did not address my concerns or answer a single question on the matters I presented. Quite frankly, a dismissive response to a parent's concerns from the Berkeley Heights School Superintendent is inappropriate and unacceptable. I presented you and the board members with the Board of Education class size policy. I stated the fact that class size recommendations for the 2023-2024 are being exceeded throughout the district; not just my child's Kindergarten class. Furthermore, to be clear, I did not question Ms. Fischer's capabilities. I have concerns she is over the limit as per the Berkeley Heights Board of Education [Policy #2312](#), and she does not have the proper support

in the classroom. However, I will put on record that her class size along with every other over capacity classroom in the district necessitates support and an aide should be placed in those classrooms based on what is most appropriate for each specific classroom. In the spirit of honest dialogue and viable solutions to the questions and concerns I raised I would like for you to take the time to re-read my original letter, carefully consider the matters I addressed and respond in a manner that reflects professionalism, true transparency and collaboration between you and a concerned parent in our school district.

Specifically, those as follows:

- 1) What is being done or plans to be done to address the lack of an aide in the classrooms that are currently at max capacity and will be further impacted by over development in the Mountain Park Elementary School and Mary K McMillin School?
- 2) In consideration of your evasive response to my request for an aide in Ms. Fischer's kindergarten class, can I conclude that there are no plans to hire one? Is that in fact the answer to the question?
- 3) What is the status of my request for you to include a copy of my original letter and

3) What is the status of my request for you to include a copy of my original letter and response dated September 4, 2023 on the agenda for the Board of Education meeting scheduled on September 14, 2023?

I look forward to your response.

Michelle Phillippi

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From: [Dr. Melissa Varley](#) >

To: [Michelle Phillippi](#) > [Angela Penna](#) >

September 7, 2023 at 3:33 PM

Re:

Dear Ms. Phillipi;

There will not be an aide placed in classrooms. The policy, 2312, allows for flexibility in classroom numbers. There are no plans to hire paraprofessionals other than those needed for our Special education population.

As of right now, our population has decreased from the past year, therefore, we are not overpopulated.

Your letter will be included in the correspondence.

Thanks,

Melissa Varley

On Thu, Sep 7, 2023 at 3:03 PM Michelle Phillippi

<[\[REDACTED\]](#)> wrote:

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[Dr. Melissa Varley](#)

[Superintendent of Schools](#)