

To the Springfield School District Board of Education: Ken Kohl, Emilio Hernandez, Jonathan Light, Nicole De Graff, and Kelly Mason, as well as Superintendent Todd Hamilton, Assistant Superintendent David Collins, Executive Assistant Martie Steigleder, and To Whom Else it May Concern,

My name is Coleen O'Neill and I spoke at the school board meeting on March 11th, in honor of my former colleague and friend, Tama Cuddeback Rowan, who passed away five days prior to that night's meeting. She passed away during a valiant fight in her second diagnosis of cancer. Tama was diagnosed with breast cancer twice while working at Mount Vernon. In her second diagnosis, a tumor formed on her vocal cord, straining her ability to speak and sing. A lover of music who lost her voice...It is surreal to me that she is gone, especially as I read her obituary and have been invited to her service later in April. Words cannot describe the sadness, devastation, and rippling impact this loss has imposed on family, friends, colleagues, students, and an entire community.

Tama taught music at Mount Vernon for 18 years. If you were fortunate enough to see one of her musicals, you would understand the talent, magic, and knack she had for teaching. She went above and beyond to include everyone, from students to staff and from parents to the community. She had a special way of making everyone feel seen, appreciated, and valued. She gave confidence to many, created passion in those that needed it, and unified communities with her ability to make the power of music so mesmerizing. I have been told by Mount Vernon staff, and parents of students, how solemn the school was when the news hit during the school day. I can only imagine teachers trying to console their students as they themselves had been pierced in the heart. It truly is tragic.

Halfway through my second year teaching, as Tama navigated her rapidly changing state of cancer, she informed me about the alarming cancer rates at Mount Vernon. She voiced how she strongly felt her diagnoses were caused by something in the school. Had I known about this, I would have accepted another teaching position I was offered the year I accepted my position at Mount Vernon. I resigned at the end of the 2022-2023 school year, an easy decision for my family and me. No amount of money is worth the risk of my health and the potential to face a journey with cancer, or even the path of an early death. Now, here I am substitute teaching for other districts, as concerns for my health as well as the district's seriousness and willingness to ensure the safety and health of students and staff leave me uncertain. My journey as a teacher was interrupted by facing a choice that I should never have had to face. It is all so disappointing...Well, not entirely. I will treasure being a teacher with Tama during her last years, enjoying the journey together with memories I will hold dear for a lifetime. Some things money cannot buy.

Some things money can buy though, like answers. Why is it that so many staff members at Mount Vernon have been diagnosed with cancer and autoimmune disorders? Why is it that every time the school underwent construction, clusters of cancer diagnoses appeared a few years following? Why is it that the only two teachers that stayed after their first diagnosis (diagnosed closely together) were both diagnosed a second time, closely together? Why is it that a correlation seems so prominent? Could it be this is occurring because of materials used to construct the school? Could it be this

is occurring because the school is built on an old filbert orchard which utilized herbicides and pesticides? Could it be something with the HVAC system, the lighting ballasts, Oregon's high moisture climate resulting in mold, or something else? I do not have the answers to these questions, but administering tests performed properly and from reliable agencies can provide these answers.

As I mentioned in my oral public comment during the last board meeting, as well as Heather Dillon spoke about in hers, we are not pleading for help yet trying to dump the work onto the district. We have formed a group of people who have been collecting data, performing research, and navigating possible avenues to get the answers so many people deserve. There are federal agencies with programs willing to help evaluate potential health hazards in the workplace. We are here to help. We are willing to embark on this journey together. We are doing more than the minimum because that is what good teachers do; that is what good people do.

I understand certain tests are required by law to be administered at schools. Those minimal tests still leave us with unanswered questions and uncertainties. When it comes to the health and safety of students and staff, sometimes it is required to do more than the minimum. I do not think most teachers chose to join the occupation looking forward to ALICE training and having to be on high alert at all times to ensure the safety of students. 99% of the teachers I have crossed paths with during graduate school and during my time working at Mount Vernon give so much more than the minimum. More time, more money, more effort, more care, more concern, more worry, more research, more love, more compassion, more help, more everything within their ability to grasp and give. So, here we are asking, for you to do a little more.

The answers we find will set us free. Knowledge is power and with power, one can hope that good will be done. The results will be one of two outcomes: all tests come back in the healthy range or a test comes back with an unhealthy rating. If all is well, then this worrisome journey comes to an end, and we thank you immensely. If all is not well, we have the opportunity to serve justice. Instead of being paralyzed by fear, fear of the unknown or fear that the district will have a larger problem to solve, hold your heads high with the power in your hands to do what is right, to be a hero. If you move forward with this journey, you all are my heroes. That is a pretty special title. One not to be worn lightly.

I ask you the same question I asked you on Monday, March 11th, 2024, would you do anything possible to prevent someone you love from being diagnosed with or passing away from cancer? I think it is safe to say everyone would answer yes. I ask you to empathize, if this was your wife, your husband, your daughter, your son, your granddaughter, your grandson, niece, nephew, sister, brother, or anyone dear to you and your life, what would you do or what would you want done? These are real people, with real lives, with real families, who have all been impacted, forever. Tama's husband texted me their granddaughter was born as she was getting laid into her hospice bed. I hope it brought her peace to know her granddaughter made it safely to this world, yet at the same time breaking her son's heart knowing his daughter will never get to experience the loving touch of her magical grandma. A heartbreaking paradox. PLEASE, don't let this happen to another person. PLEASE, help us find the answers that are deserved. PLEASE, in honor of Colleen Hunter, Patricia Gagnon, Tama

Cuddeback Rowan, and the dozens of Mount Vernon staff and families whose lives have been changed forever...

PLEASE...help.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and consider my pleas.

Sincerely,
Coleen O'Neill
A friend in mourning.

To Springfield Public Schools Board of Education,

It has been over a year since I first came before you and spoke in February 2023 on the topic of the health conditions of staff who do or did work at Mount Vernon Elementary, and the safety of the school building. My mother was on the staff of Mount Vernon when the current building opened. She has since retired, but is included in the group of the many who have worked at the building and been diagnosed with cancer or other health conditions. That's right, many—not just a couple, faculty were diagnosed with cancer or other serious health conditions. It's time the School Board hold the District administration accountable to do something.

I've recently seen the District make an attempt to address the concerns of faculty, families, and the community of whether or not Mount Vernon is a safe place for students to learn and staff to work. Better late than never. But, School Board members, please do NOT accept that this is a new concern. Staff have been trying to prompt the District for years. I, as well as many others, hope the District continues to do it's due diligence.

In the coming weeks, before we learn results of testing done at Mount Vernon Elementary School, we ask that a committee be formed to hear the results and plan next steps, whatever they may be. Please include current and former Mount Vernon staff alongside District representatives. Let's work together and come up with the best possible solutions to make sure Mount Vernon is a safe place for each and every person that steps foot inside it's walls. Let's be a District where staff want to come to work, knowing District administration doesn't just listen, but hears them.

I thank you for your service to the Springfield Community, and hope to see you make a positive impact on this School District.

Sincerely,
Danielle Smith
Springfield Resident

A Public Comment regarding the Proposed Middle School Science Curriculum Adoption

Dear Honorable Members of the School Board for Springfield Public Schools,

We are reaching out to the School Board for the Springfield Public Schools to ask you to intervene on the behalf of our elementary school students and teachers. We understand that the Board is being asked to approve the adoption and purchase of a new science curriculum for the middle schools while at the same time failing to provide anything for the elementary schools. This is appalling, and it shows a lack of transparency and a misunderstanding of the current state of affairs in the district. The Board must require the district to adopt science curricula for both the elementary schools and the middle schools this year.

Please consider the following facts before you act.

Below is a table of the Oregon Statewide Assessment System (OSAS) testing data from 2023 for the four middle schools in the SPS:

Middle school	Percentage of eighth grade students meeting grade-level science expectations
Agnes Stewart MS	20
Briggs MS	13
Hamlin MS	26
Thurston MS	17

If you investigate this matter further, you will discover that the OSAS science test scores for our fifth grade students are just as poor. The OSAS science tests measure student performance as it relates to their accumulated knowledge and skills with respect to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS.) In other words, the fifth grade and the eighth grade tests measure what a child has learned going all the way back to kindergarten. The fifth grade test measures what is supposed to be six years of accumulated student learning, and the eighth grade test measures what is supposed to be nine years of accumulated student learning.

Teachers see quite clearly (and students suffer) the consequences of the district policies that have led to this situation. As our students move up in grades, their lack of instruction in the NGSS becomes glaringly apparent at both the middle and high school levels, since it is likely that they have missed out on nearly six years of essential, fundamental science instruction that they were supposed to receive while in elementary school. High school teachers report that student performance on the state science test and on the ACT has also been quite poor, so this failure to provide science education at the elementary level has reverberated through the system and through the academic careers of our students.

Going back to at least 2017, elementary teachers in the SPS have not been provided with NGSS-aligned, ODE-approved curriculum, support materials, professional development,

nor sufficient time during the school day to provide the required instruction in science. At the present, time for science instruction is limited in some elementary buildings to **less than 30 minutes per WEEK**. This runs counter to the [recommendation from the science specialists at ODE](#) who say that students at the elementary level should be receiving **45 minutes of science instruction per DAY**. Concerns about the lack of elementary level science instruction have been repeatedly brought to the district for years, yet no action has been taken to address them.

Every school district in the state of Oregon is bound by regulations contained in the Oregon Department of Education Division 22 Assurances. Within the Division 22 Assurances, [581-022-2030](#) requires that districts “shall provide a planned K - 12 instructional program” in science. It is our belief that the district is currently **out of compliance** with this requirement as it relates to the state of science instruction at the elementary schools, unless the district’s planned program is to systematically deny its students in grades K - 5 with NGSS-aligned, ODE-approved science instruction.

Consideration of these facts should have you asking why the district would choose to continue to deny elementary teachers science curriculum for grades K - 5 when the school board is being asked to support a curriculum adoption for grades 6 - 8. The publishers of science curricula make the strong case that it makes good sense to purchase materials for grades K - 8 for many reasons, primarily because publishers construct their materials in such a way as to help elementary kids transition smoothly into middle school science classes. However, it appears that you are being asked to adopt a science curriculum for the middle schools that has no companion pieces for the elementary level. This simply makes no sense.

The district must get itself in compliance with ODE regulations regarding science instruction by making a science curriculum adoption for grades K - 8 this year. The fact that the district’s de facto policy that science does not need to be taught to students in grades K - 5 is currently harming our students. Every middle and high science teacher’s classroom in SPS contains many students unprepared for rigorous and required NGSS-aligned science instruction, because their teachers at the elementary level were prevented from providing it.

Do not be fooled by assertions that a plan for science in grades K - 5 will be forthcoming, because apparently there has been no plan for at least seven years. Do not be swayed by talk that K - 5 teachers can make do using the *Wonders* English language arts curriculum as it is not approved by ODE for teaching science and its reading passages are not fully aligned with grade level NGSS.

It is time that this school board listened to those of us working with students every day. If you value and respect your teachers, then hear us when we say: please do not let this systematic neglect of our students continue any longer. Require the district to prove to you and the SPS community that every student in every grade will get the science instruction they deserve every day, beginning in kindergarten, starting next year.

Signed,

Elizabeth Page Elementary School Teachers:

Erin Allman
Laura Goldstein
Mikell Harshbarger
Robyn Hass
Ivy McClain
Trista Meduna
Char Sandefer
Burdy Smith
Terese Wagner

Science Teachers from A3, Springfield and Thurston High Schools (and other Concerned Educators):

Ryan Herlands
Jon Hornung
Ryan Elliott
Sarah Huppert
Nathan Horwood
Andrew Spiek
Emma Mullen
Sonja Ljungdahl
Nancy Buchanan
Cody Rosenberg
Laura Farrelly
Jason Ray