PALISADES PARK BOARD OF EDUCATION

410 Second Street
Palisades Park, NJ 07650

April 11, 2025

" The Board acknowledges and values the important work our teachers do daily to educate and support our students. This statement addresses concerns with negotiation practices and leadership, not the dedication of our educators. We remain committed to working collaboratively with all stakeholders to achieve a fair and sustainable agreement that prioritizes the educational needs of our students while respecting the contributions of our educators."

Good evening, community members, staff, and fellow board members,

This statement is issued in response to the recent 'vote of no confidence' against the Board by the Palisades Park Education Association (PPEA).

Negotiating in good faith means actively engaging in discussions with sincerity, honesty, and a genuine intent to reach a fair agreement beneficial to all parties involved. While our Board remains firmly committed to this principle, we are deeply concerned by the actions and approach taken by the Education Association.

Despite numerous meetings, extensive dialogue, and multiple attempts by this Board to find common ground, we have experienced repeated setbacks due to unreasonable demands, deceptive practices, bullying tactics, and unwillingness by the Association's negotiating team to engage constructively toward resolution. For example, the initial salary proposal from the Education Association was over 290% further away from the so-called county average (a number that the PPEA has changed multiple times throughout negotiations) compared to the Board's initial offer, demonstrating unrealistic expectations and significantly complicating negotiations. Even more concerning is that the leadership's behavior throughout the process reflects poorly on those entrusted with educating the future generation. Such conduct is not only unprofessional but undermines the integrity of the negotiation process and the trust the community places in its educators.

In another clear example of bad faith and deceptive practices, the Education Association attempted to claim that a specific Board proposal item was illegal. However, when the Board asked for the specific statute or precedent case that supported this claim, the Association leadership refused to provide it, dismissively stating, 'go ask your lawyer.' Upon investigation, the Board

discovered that the cited case actually supported the Board's position, not the Association's. Additionally, the Board attorney independently confirmed that the proposal was legal and appropriate. Such deceptive tactics only serve to undermine the negotiation process and demonstrate a lack of genuine intent to reach a fair resolution.

Additionally, the Education Association frequently complains about being underpaid. However, a thorough review of county salary guides demonstrates that the Palisades Park salary guide is highly competitive within the region. Despite this, the Association continues to insist upon proposals that are disproportionate and misaligned with the established standards of compensation across the county.

The Negotiations Committee did its absolute best to minimize legal fees by dedicating hundreds of hours to reviewing the contract and drafting proposals directly, despite having received a decades-old, outdated, and unlawful contract that required major revisions. The Board's attorney was only involved at the final stage for a thorough review of the proposals.

However, attorney fees began to grow when the Education Association unjustifiably filed unfair labor practice charges that required legal responses, which then led to unnecessary mediations. These actions demonstrate that the Association was never genuinely planning to negotiate in good faith, but rather to create conflict and additional legal expenses. I would remind the community that these are your taxpayer funds that were needlessly spent and caused by the PPEA's irrational tactics.

PPEA has also made false and misleading statements accusing the Board of spending excessive amounts of money on legal fees. In reality, the majority of the legal fees referenced by the Association were tied to entirely separate and significant matters that required legal resolution. PPEA was fully aware of this fact, having obtained unredacted versions of legal invoices through an OPRA request submitted to the CSA's office. These invoices clearly documented that the charges in question were related to incidents and legal issues arising within school buildings, not collective bargaining.

Many parents, students, and teachers have expressed that this prolonged negotiation process has negatively affected the students. They are encouraged to consider who truly suffers when teachers, who are already competitively compensated, make unreasonable demands for a larger share of a limited budget. The unfortunate reality is that students suffer. When excessive demands

are met, other critical areas of the budget are cut to accommodate those increases. This results in worse facilities, higher student-to-teacher ratios from staff cuts, diminished curriculum, and reduced programming opportunities. The Board has made efforts to install air conditioning in the Lindbergh School auditorium and gym; however, this initiative could not be included in the 2025–26 school year budget due to financial constraints as advised by district administrators.

Despite these competitive salaries, it is important to note that state testing scores within our district consistently remain below the state average. This persistent issue raises further questions about the disconnect between compensation demands and measurable educational outcomes. According to recent media reports, Palisades Park Jr./Sr. High School received a 2023–24 Summative Score of only 19.9 out of 100—placing the school in a low percentile statewide and raising serious concerns within the community. In response, the Board established the Evaluation Advisory Committee in January 2025 to support student success by developing clear and effective rubrics to evaluate performance.

(Reference: NJ DOE School Performance Report – Summative Ratings reflect the school's percentile rank in comparison to all other schools across New Jersey. ESSA Accountability Indicators include ELA and Math proficiency and growth, graduation rates, progress toward English language proficiency, and chronic absenteeism.)

In another instance, the Board informed the Education Association that the longevity terms of the contract could be interpreted as non-cumulative, raising concerns that many long-term teachers may have inadvertently been overpaid. The Board proactively suggested clarifying this language to protect educators from potential financial repercussions. However, union leadership, rather than acknowledging the goodwill and protective nature of this proposal, chose instead to dispute and argue the point unnecessarily, further hindering constructive dialogue.

Additionally, the Board proactively introduced proposals specifically aimed at protecting the interests and welfare of PPEA members, yet the Education Association leadership inexplicably opposed these measures, seemingly choosing to argue solely for the sake of argument rather than considering the benefits for their membership. The Board could have said the sky is blue, and the Association leadership would have started arguing it was red. For instance, when the Board introduced a proposal to increase the stipend for the district's dance

coach—representing the only national championship-winning extracurricular organization in the district—even this supportive gesture was misconstrued and criticized by Association leadership as a negative action, despite almost all other athletic programs having negative records for years.

Furthermore, we are troubled by the Education Association's repeated breaches of confidentiality, directly violating the negotiation ground rules established by the Association itself. Such actions erode trust and further impede constructive dialogue.

We are also aware of recent comments in the media highlighting that only three board members currently have children enrolled in our schools. We emphasize that all board members pay school taxes, thereby directly contributing to the funding and sustainability of our district which primarily go towards teacher's salaries and benefits. Furthermore, this dynamic results in a net benefit to our school system, as it does not impose additional pupil costs while ensuring decisions remain impartial, fiscally responsible, and focused entirely on educational excellence for every student in our community.

The PPEA also claimed in the media that the Board allowed $1.3 million in banked cap funding to expire—funds that could have allegedly gone toward classroom enhancements. According to district administrators, Palisades Park generated $1,312,519 in banked cap during the 2020–21 school year. These funds were available for use over a three-year period, but only after exhausting other state-mandated adjustments, such as enrollment and healthcare adjustments. In the spring of 2024, the Finance Committee was advised by administrators that the district was not eligible to use the banked cap due to insufficient enrollment growth. For the 2025–26 school year, the current Board submitted a tentative budget that reflects the full range of adjustments allowed under state guidelines.

The Association’s claim that Palisades Park teachers are among the lowest-paid in the county is both misleading and easily disproven by publicly available data. For example, the Taxpayer’s Guide to Education Spending and a January 14, 2025 article about “Bergen County teacher salaries” clearly show otherwise. Ironically, this same chart “Median Bergen County teacher pay 2023-2024” was presented by the Association's leadership to the Board’s Negotiations Committee during a March 27 meeting. Among 14 comparable Bergen County districts based on average years of teacher experience, Palisades Park ranked 6th in median salary.

For example:

- Palisades Park: Average teacher experience: 11.9 years, average salary: $74,363
- Leonia: Average teacher experience: 11.6 years, average salary: $69,452
- In 2023–24, Palisades Park's starting salary (BA Step 1) ranked:
- 17th of 63 Bergen County districts
- 1st of 8 districts in Enrollment Group 5 (K–12 districts with enrollment under 1,800)
- 9th of 28 Bergen County K–12 districts
- 28th of 85 districts across Passaic, Bergen, and Hudson Counties
- 2nd of 10 districts in the same tri-county enrollment group

While maximum teacher salaries may not rank as highly, the district offers competitive longevity incentives to support and reward experienced educators.

What is far more concerning is that it is the students—not the teachers—who are underfunded. Palisades Park ranks among the lowest in per-pupil spending in Bergen County. Therefore, it is even more imperative that the Board carefully balance teacher salary spend versus numerous other priorities.

The Board of Education has worked diligently to strike a fair and balanced approach that supports students, respects teachers, and protects taxpayers. Unfortunately, the Association's continued use of misleading public statements only sows confusion and breeds frustration among parents and the community.

Regarding the recent vote of no confidence against the Board, we respectfully suggest that the lack of confidence might more appropriately be directed toward the leadership of the Education Association. It is noteworthy that negotiations with other bargaining units have been collaborative and productive. Even though board membership has continually changed over the years, negotiations with the Education Association have repeatedly encountered similar and unnecessarily challenging obstacles. This should beg the question, which party is the real issue? It is likely not a coincidence that it was the same PPEA leadership during the previous negotiations 4 years ago that dragged the process out for over 20 months while utilizing a very similar playbook.

In light of all the issues raised and the continued lack of good faith negotiations from the Education Association leadership, we propose that the Board of Education take a formal vote of no confidence in the leadership of the Palisades Park Education Association today. This action would send a clear message that

deceptive practices, obstructionism, and bad faith bargaining at the expense of taxpayers, PPEA members, students, administration, and other stakeholders in the school district will not be tolerated.

Thank you.

Palisades Park Board of Education

Addendums

April 11, 2025 Board of Education Meeting

PUBLIC RELATIONS (RE: NEGOTIATIONS)- NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC

Be it resolved, the Palisades Park Board of Education authorizes and directs the posting and/or dissemination of this notice through all appropriate channels, including but not limited to media outlets, the district website, and official communication platforms serving the school district and local community. If necessary, the Board may also hold a press conference to ensure accurate public communication. Furthermore, the Board reserves the right to designate special counsel to oversee this matter in order to uphold the public's right to transparency and information.

April 30, 2025 Board of Education Meeting

BOARD PRESIDENT REPORT

" *This statement is to resolve any misunderstanding between the Board and the Education Association. The statement I read on April 11 was to refute false media reports and misleading information spread by the PPEA leadership about the Board of Education, in the belief that the public deserves and has the right to truthful and accurate information, especially if it's about the governing body that constitutes public education.*
The Board acknowledges and values the important work out teachers do daily to educate and support our students. "