

NOTE: these comments were read by Mario Nunes during the Board of Education meeting held 3/9/21. These were his personal views, not those of the Board of Education.

I'd like to address some of the more frequent observations and concerns we've heard over the past year since the onset of the pandemic...

A major critique that's often been cited is people reporting that when they reach out to the District or to the Board, their calls or emails are ignored and not addressed. I know that I have personally replied to a number of emails and I can't think of anyone I haven't spoken to who's made the effort to contact me. I've heard the same remarks from everyone here and the folks at the District have shown me the email responses they've sent, so I can't tell if the complaints come before some of those writing got a response or because the response they received was unsatisfactory. What I ask is for anyone who has received no response to an inquiry, please let us know so we can address it...

We've also heard multiple notes of frustration regarding our posted "Frequently Asked Questions." This issue has been more difficult to sort out than we had anticipated. We all agree it isn't ideal and we've taken steps to find more intuitive ways to get our message out to the community. We believe we've responded to each of the concerns that have been addressed. We understand that our answers don't satisfy certain individual concerns, but considering that we are serving nearly 4000 students and personnel, it would be impossible to operate without certain compromises. Despite the competing interests, we feel we are doing the best we can for our venerated Vestal community. I feel comfortable making this observation because I have people I care for and love working at every level within this district and I know first hand the sacrifices they've made to promote and advance our district through this harrowing period...

I've heard various observations regarding cooperation between the Board, Administration, Unions, Staff & Faculty, and our students. All I can say is it's easy to single out unfortunate individual interactions, but overall, I couldn't be prouder of the level of concern and cooperation I've witnessed and heard about with everyone involved. Frankly, in the 7 years I've been on the Board, I've never seen this level of effort and sacrifice made by everyone involved in their efforts to educate and care for students. I know there are reports of conflicts in other regions and districts in the news. Those reports are not a reflection of what's happening at Vestal. I couldn't be more proud of how everyone has rallied in keeping Vestal the premier district we all know it to be...

Our reopening plan and our ever-evolving process as we've progressed through the year was and continues to be designed with the coordination of our various focus committees. The level of planning and coordination it takes to make any decision in a school district is staggering. We've opted to take a conservative approach in every decision we've been able to control. Our aim has been to focus on safety for our students and community, to maintain as consistent and predictable a schedule as possible ensuring our families have the ability to plan around our schedule, and to be flexible as new issues arise. Our most recent crisis with transportation is a perfect example of one of the countless issues that can happen in an instant while we're focusing on trying to get more students in the buildings. We needed to find a way to equitably meet the needs regarding the transportation of each of our students while trying diligently to minimize the disruption the crisis would cause the community as a whole. Considering the short amount of time provided to the Administration and the options available, it turned into a nightmare scenario that didn't resolve itself as quickly as everyone would have hoped for. These are the types of issues the District faces on a daily basis. Normally the community doesn't notice because our competent District staff have better time to coordinate things, but when a crisis drops on a Sunday afternoon, there's no way to sort things out adequately...

Vestal has a reputation for affluence and resources. What has been a growing concern over the last several years within the District is the growing number of families who live with less financial certainty. Many of our decisions are made understanding that a chain is only as strong as its most vulnerable link. We cannot overlook anyone, especially during this time of crisis. Consequently, sometimes what looks on the surface like an easy solution doesn't take into account the needs of those who might otherwise be overlooked. Vestal is a community that cares and we aim to represent that quality in every choice we make...

In addition to caring for things within our District, it takes the coordination of District Departments, Families, the greater Vestal Community, Other Districts, and government at every level in decision making. This is an issue that's plagued our District from the start. Our District is filled with dedicated staff and faculty who are regularly working to operate efficiently and effectively. Routinely the Administration makes decisions based on understandings it's had from coordination or policy from sources outside of the District. These agreements or understandings often change unexpectedly leaving the District in an awkward or unfortunate role having to change its plan without warning. We understand how frustrating this can be to our community and we share in your frustration as it compromises the plans the District makes in its effort to meet the needs of our Vestal and Apalachin communities...

Early in the school year, certain voices in the District community expressed concerns that our reopening plan might be too conservative. As we worked to formalize our 4 phase plan in the 2 short weeks the state provided us to design it, we began to see the results from schools opening and then immediately closing down in the southern states due to what seemed like less thoughtfulness in their approach. From that point on most of us felt certain we had taken the right approach in our cautious and thoughtful plan. Everyday we review our position and reevaluate how we should advance as we aim for returning the District to full regular attendance. In addition to that goal, we are constantly reviewing lessons learned to ensure we maintain the high quality we feel we provide our students, despite the constraints caused by the pandemic. Also, we are keeping track of the lessons learned to see what new procedures we plan to shed once the pandemic lifts and which ones will be folded into our new normal...

In the spirit of describing why we've adopted such a strong conservative approach, we felt that consistency and safety were two of the most important problems to focus on. In terms of consistency, we recognized that families have the awesome burden of planning their lives around personal schedules and responsibilities in these difficult times. We worked to ensure that families could depend on as few volatile schedule disruptions as possible. Further, we recognize that students and younger people are at a lower risk of severe illness due to Covid 19, but many of the older loved ones in their lives are not. Our perspective is not exclusively to protect students' health and wellbeing. Many students have people in their lives who may be vulnerable and we care about them, too. Considering how we have been able to avoid fewer scheduling disruptions than several of our regional colleagues and how we've been able, so far, to report that there have been no reported cases of transmission of Covid 19 among our student population, most of us believe we've made the right decision and feel we should continue working with what we believe to be a solid plan...

Modern schools are designed to function best when all students are in-person, in-class 5 days per week. The pandemic has created a circumstance that makes it immeasurably harder for everyone involved to teach students. Everyone at the District; the Board, Administration, Faculty, and Staff desperately want students in the buildings. The extra work brought on by the pandemic and the stress we all feel can be overwhelming. So far we've lost the joy of activities

like sports, arts, and clubs. Teachers have to adjust to teaching in multiple venues and media, which they aren't trained to do and have had to learn or teach themselves. Staff have had to take extra precautions and assume extra responsibilities above their regular intensive requirements. The Administration has had the thankless job of making impossible decisions and trying to balance those decisions with available resources, working within financial constraints, incorporating decisions while still meeting regulatory requirements, balancing needs from those who insist on more in-person instruction versus those who insist on a greater focus on health and safety, and being nimble enough to adjust when new guidance or requirements are handed down from outside authorities. I'd love to say that we've managed these trying times flawlessly, but that's not even remotely true. As I mentioned, we've lost many of the student activities that make learning a well-rounded experience for our celebrated Vestal students. We've lost resources like substitute teachers, local businesses that serve our staff and students, and worst of all, we've lost invaluable staff. This cursed pandemic has been devastating and it isn't over yet. Though we seem to get reports that it's easing, that doesn't mean that's it's over, or that it won't get worse again. The one thing I feel certain I can say about it is that we're all in this mess together.

Mario Nunes