

Watchung Hills Regional Education Association

October 17, 2023

Good evening, my name is Greg O'Reilly, and I am here as WHREA President to speak on behalf of the Association in response to Bob Morrison's statement from the last Board of Education (BOE) meeting.

On October 3, Bob Morrison read a prepared statement expressing his perspective on the negotiations process and then sent it as a letter to the faculty & staff and the parents of WHRHS students.

Unfortunately, his letter contained erroneous and misleading statements, and I am here to set the record straight.

In his statement, Bob Morrison characterized the WHREA as an "NJEA-representative" and "Trenton-based" union," as though we simply follow directives from the NJEA. **This is not true.**

While it is accurate that we are a local affiliate of the state organization, this description disregards the good work the WHREA has done for the students, faculty & staff and community-at-large.

Throughout the years, we have

- Organized an initiative to personally hand-write farewell letters to each graduating senior;
- Donated gift baskets for the seniors' Project Graduation celebration;
- Raised the funds and organized an annual WHREA scholarship for 1-2 graduating seniors who intend to pursue a career in education.
- We will be conducting our annual WHREA food drive next month, with all donations going to the Somerset County Food Bank Network.
- We will be organizing our second food-packing event this December 9th, aiming to bring several parts of our local communities together with the goal of packing 30,000 meals for those who live with food-insecurity.

In his statement, Bob Morrison said that the WHREA met once with the BOE Negotiations Committee two years ago. **This is not true.**

After the BOE refused to negotiate with our full negotiations team and took the extreme action of filing an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) against the WHREA, we met four separate times in 2023.

We insisted—and, in several cases, begged—the BOE Negotiations Committee to work with us to find a practical and tangible compromise so that we could negotiate a contract while we wait for the BOE’s ULP to be determined.

At each of these meetings, the WHREA has been realistic in understanding the BOE’s perspective and offering compromises sensitive to its needs. Whether it is offering to put a cap on the number of our negotiations team; offering a schedule of what negotiations meetings they can attend or not attend; limiting our bargaining council to attend virtually; each of those compromises were offered in good faith to address the concerns of the BOE.

In his statement, Bob Morrison said that there is no precedent for a district negotiating with an education association with its full negotiations team including a bargaining council with its full membership. **This is not true.**

The BOE in 2019 negotiated with our full negotiations team for two to three meetings before they requested we begin to negotiate in 2-on-2 meetings. Our full negotiations team deliberated and voted to engage with the BOE via 2-on-2 meetings which again demonstrates the WHREA’s willingness to compromise.

Additionally, the WHREA provided a list of districts that engaged with local education associations that used this model in the bargaining process three months ago in July. Districts such as Riverside Township Public School District, Hainesport Township School District, Mercer County Special Services School District, and more all engaged with their local education association’s bargaining council in the bargaining process.

We regret that Bob Morrison’s statement disregarded this truth.

Finally, Bob Morrison statement claimed the WHREA is harming its own members because we are “concerned with setting a precedent.” **This is not true.**

Not only is it untrue, but it’s a blatant attempt to divide our membership, and it’s both legally and ethically questionable.

The sad reality is the faculty & staff have felt disregarded and ignored by the administration and Board for years, and Bob Morrison’s use of misinformation and untrue statements reflect his genuine lack of understanding of who the faculty & staff of this school are, what they bring to the table and what they need from this district.

To be clear, here’s what we are about:

- We are professionals with years of experience and expertise in the functions of our high school.
- We are collaborative and highly engaged in developing working conditions that make Watchung Hills more effective and efficient.
- We are professionals whose contributions and input on negotiations proposals aim to strengthen working conditions, improve salaries and benefits, and—most importantly—create a contract that will attract and retain the best for Watchung Hills’ students and community.

The bottom line is the WHREA has consistently communicated and demonstrated our commitment to compromise, and it's regrettable that Bob Morrison's statement stated otherwise. As local president, I will not have our reputation besmirched, and I will vigorously defend my members against mistruths.

So, tonight, I urge this Board to act and the Board Negotiations Committee to negotiate with the WHREA even as we await the ULP decision. It's time to focus on what matters, and our students do not benefit from the Board and the Association insulting each other, nor does this community or district benefit from staff working under an expired agreement.

Let's move forward and get this negotiation process underway.

