

LINDEN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Danny A. Robertozzi, Ed.D.

Superintendent

Raymond J. Topoleski

Board President



Ahmed Shehata

Board Member

DESK OF
COMMISSIONER AHMED SHEHATA

Dear President Topoleski,

I am writing to you about the press release which Mayor Armstead put out today, which concerned the utilization of our school property for voting in the June Primary.

As a junior member of the Safety Committee on Linden's Board of Education, the responsibility to protect our children is one of the greatest honors that has been bestowed on me and one I take quite seriously. At the EST meeting immediately following the primary, NUMEROUS parents stood and spoke of their concerns for the safety of their children. The repetitive theme was that we make our parents and guardians follow a rigorous procedure to enter our schools, but on primary day we have people entering our buildings without knowing who they are, if they belong there, or if they are even a registered voter. It was noted that anyone could walk in. It was in direct conflict with our security procedures

Theresa Villani, the Chairperson of the Security Committee, stood up at the parent EST meeting and took full responsibility for that day. While it was on all of us, she felt it necessary that the parents understood that the Board recognized the seriousness of their concerns and that it was going to be addressed immediately.

If you recall, this issue was then brought up by Mrs. Birch during the Committee of the Whole as part of her EST report. I specifically recall having a discussion on possible solutions. I don't understand why some board members are trying to say that they never heard about any of these issues when it's recorded for the minutes of the meeting.

I think it's important that everyone understands that this request was just one option we discussed, but that it definitely the one that we should attempt first, as the final decision is not ours to make. There was not one single board member who raised any concern about the matter.

I believe the next step, if that would have been denied, was to see how we could leverage a professional development day that would still benefit the district employees or perhaps address each building on a case by case basis to see if we could have the voting, yet still secure the building. Beyond that, I recall there were other things discussed briefly but it was decided to see where this led as it was the most comprehensive solution to protect the children.

Now, from my understanding, and please, correct me if I am wrong, Dr. Robertozzi decided NOT to send the letter to the election board and city clerk. Can you please explain to me how Mayor Armstead got hold of a confidential letter sent to only to the Board and select people in administration?

We all have a duty to do what is best for our children. I am completely aware of, and believe that, voting is a civic duty that should be exercised by all who have the privilege. Accusations of voter suppression are unjust, un-American and egregious. As an elected official, I understand the importance of elections and we, in no way, shape, or form were trying to deter voters from voting. I was elected by the people, in part, to protect their children, so I know the importance of elections. However, I cannot sit idly by knowing that we are turning a blind eye to something that can possibly impact our children negatively. I am appalled that the Mayor would completely dismiss a legitimate security risk raised by our parents.

At this point in history, to continue to do something simply because, "it has always been done this way", shows a complete lack of understanding of today's security issues as well as a lack of empathy for our parents and guardians.

The Board of Education, by design, is a nonpartisan entity that's sole purpose is the well-being and betterment of our children. There are numerous locations throughout Linden in which voters can express their civic duty in voting. I, myself, would lose the convenience of walking down the street to vote if we did choose to eliminate primary voting. However, my lack of convenience is a small price to pay for our student's safety. We are in a fragile state, not just in Linden, but in our country.

We, as a whole, need to put politics aside and start being about purpose and the students. I am aware this statement will not make me popular amongst some political figures in Linden; however, I took an oath in January to protect our students and do what is in their best interest, unequivocally.

I am eager to discuss this issue further at the next board meeting.

Respectfully and sincerely,
Ahmed Shehata