

To the members of the Atlantic School Board and Trojan CommUNITY:

My name is Eric Johnson. I am here tonight to bring the public's attention to the ongoing bed bug issue in the district. I believe that our entire Trojan CommUNITY should know about this issue, how it has been handled by administration to this point, and what the plan is moving forward. For those of you that were elected to this board to bring more transparency, I hope you agree that this conversation is necessary. I would also like to request that a written version of these words is posted as part of the meeting minutes. I hope this message reaches all potentially affected families because it is apparent the school is not communicating effectively with them.

On November 22, 2024 bed bugs were discovered on one or more students' person in the high school. It was relayed that these students have a younger sibling in Schuler Elementary. Staff at Schuler elementary acted quickly to implement a policy of increased cleanings in the student's home room, and required that student to change clothes at school. During the week of December 2, 2024, it was reported that a high school staff member had found a live bug on their clothing in their own home after school. It was also during this week that a fellow student in Schuler spotted a live bug on the affected student. These events show that the current mitigation practices are ineffective.

On the afternoon of December 5, 2024, I spoke over the phone with Dr. Beth Johnsen. She alleged that the school board was aware of this issue. We did not define what she meant by "the board" but in speaking with members I know that at least 2 had no idea this was taking place. I also spoke with the department of public health. Megan Roberts informed me that they were not informed of this issue until December 4th. Finally, late in the day on December 6th, a notice was sent to the families of one section of Schuler Elementary students. To my knowledge the families of adjacent sections have not been notified officially by the school.

Also on December 6th, the staff was notified district wide of this issue. The letter states that "all necessary steps" are being taken. According to the department of public health, they believe the school is handling this properly and they will not be stepping in "until this becomes a bigger issue or an infestation in the school." Megan Roberts was unclear about what criteria had to be met to reach "an infestation" or "a bigger issue." The question this leaves is - what about those caught in the intermediate? What about the families who are part of the becoming infested or the growing issue? The source is known. It should be dealt with swiftly to prevent a larger issue that requires more involvement from the department of public health. This doesn't seem to be a consideration given the conversation I had last week with Dr. Johnsen. There are rumors that professional treatments are ongoing or about to start. These are going to be a waste of valuable school resources if the source isn't eliminated. The letter from Dr. Johnsen notes correctly that "bed bugs do not spread disease and are not a sign of uncleanness." This is only a half truth. According to the CDC, bed bugs do present health risks. They can cause "serious allergic reactions, insomnia, anxiety and skin problems."

The staff letter says discretion is important. I was also informed multiple times by Dr. Johnsen that these students' right to public education cannot be deprived. I agree with both of these statements. However, the school has many policies that do "deprive" a student to their rights for an education in the name of protecting the health and safety of the staff and other students. For example, if a student has a fever of 100 degrees or above, they are sent home. They are not to return to school

until they have been fever free for 24 hours without medication. Parents are expected to act with integrity in this scenario, caring for their children while also doing their part to protect the CommUNITY. Given that the source of the sickness is impossible to identify, all reasonable people agree that this is a good policy. At the same time we can all acknowledge it does not totally prevent the spread of sickness. The most common comparison I have been pointed towards by administration is the head lice policy. Notice is sent to fellow students' families (although I would doubt the school waits 2 weeks to send this notice), and mitigation practices are put in place. Mitigation of head lice is a simple and short-lived process. Neither of these examples are what the Trojan CommUNITY faces at this time. Bed bugs are not the flu. Bed bugs are not head lice. They cannot be treated the same. Bed bug treatments take weeks to be proven effective and can potentially cost thousands of dollars. The hazard removal and CommUNITY notification mechanisms exist in some form in several policies. The fact that it seems no consideration for these options is even being explored is inexplicable. Inaction on the grounds of "we don't have a policy for that" is completely unacceptable.

As a parent of a student, it is my right to protect my children. If I decide to take my own measures to protect my child, such as hold them out of school, I will be in violation of the new attendance policy. According to the written policy and Dr. Johnsen, there are no exceptions. This means that if the school doesn't solve this problem within 9 school days, and I hold my child out of school as a result, I would be referred to the county attorney and the infestation would be allowed to continue. Who's right to a public education is being denied in this scenario?

Admittedly, I do not know the ins and outs of school and state policy. I do believe that using a lack of specific policy as an excuse for lack of action is a catastrophic mistake and puts our entire Trojan CommUNITY at risk. We can all have compassion for the students who have to live with this. However, that compassion does not have to be shown in the form of being forced into sleepless nights, worrying about exposing our extended families as the holidays approach, and wondering if that red bump is a pimple or a sign that my house hold is part of the "becoming a bigger issue" in our CommUNITY.

Thank you,
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Concerned member of the CommUNITY