To: New Haven Board of Education
From: Leslie Blatteau, President, NHFT
Date: Monday, February 14, 2022

In one month, we will arrive at the 2-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic permanently impacting our school system, our community, and the way we teach and learn. It is clear that so much has changed - ask anyone who is working in our schools, and they will tell you - the unprecedented exhaustion and anxiety, and the erosion of trust that is central to the health of any organization, are causing people to question why they show up to school everyday.

So first I want to acknowledge this reality - this “am I going to make it” reality - this is how people feel, and it is okay to name this in service of meeting people’s needs and collaborating to solve some of our most challenging problems. Acknowledging this reality is a prerequisite for responsive and thoughtful action. People are not wrong to have these feelings - in fact, I would be worried if people were not feeling some doubt, hopelessness, and outrage. Our world was turned upside down, we lost family, friends, rituals, routines, experiences, and opportunities, so much has changed.

But I would like to ask tonight: How have our schools changed? When, where and how did we give our school communities, our teachers and students specifically, permission to slow down, breathe, play, rebuild and heal? Or have we doubled down on a model that forgets what we know about child development, intrinsic motivation, and a strengths-based approach?

We urge our leaders, here at the local level, and at the state and national level as well, to listen to the students and educators who are letting us know that this current system is not working for us. This call to action is not about blame; it is about moving forward together, with trust and a willingness to nurture, and a belief that for education to work, we must be willing to honor one another’s humanity.

Many of us who care deeply about student learning feel a disconnect when we try to do our jobs in a way that prioritizes the whole child. On one hand we hear about the need to support students, create space for joy in the learning process, and practice self-care. And on the other hand, we feel intense pressure related to data collection, data entry, pacing charts and ongoing monitoring. We need support with our students’ behavioral and emotional struggles, with the overwhelming vacancies in some of our schools. Educators deserve fair pay, and we have the right to autonomy, safety, dignity, and respect in our workplaces. Even the office that handles personnel and labor relations issues is understaffed and needs more support and resources from this Board to meet the complex demands of the moment. We know this Board can play a role in addressing these systemic issues and we believe the public listening can play a role ensuring New Haven Public Schools has the resources and the will to take action as soon as possible. Thank you for your time and consideration. And thank you to New Haven’s educators who are giving so much of themselves during this incredibly intense time.