

October 24, 2022

Mr. Samuels,

We are reaching out to you regarding our deep concerns with the Principal at Public School 166, Debra Mastriano. Based on our experience as parents and the multiple allegations that we have heard from numerous teachers, **we believe Ms. Mastriano should be investigated and, in our view, dismissed from her role as Principal at Public School 166.** The discontent from teachers in our school has been obvious for several years, most notably in DOE and UFT school surveys and teacher turnover. Furthermore, in a formal complaint to the UFT last year, Ms. Mastriano was described by her own teachers as “an abusive and ineffective manager who engages in fraudulent as well as bullying behaviors.” While the school continues to perform well with regard to test scores, we attribute this almost exclusively to the excellence of the teachers and staff in spite of Ms. Mastriano’s leadership. She has **consistently displayed a pattern of toxicity that has harmed the growth and well-being of students, teachers, and staff.**

We are glad to hear that you are coming to visit PS166 soon, so **below we have compiled allegations of her racism, abusive supervision, and authoritarian leadership, as well as her unethical, erratic, and irresponsible behavior,** all of which have been severely detrimental to the school community. Of course, the patterns and examples we list below will likely be things she will be careful to hide from you on your visit, but **we ask that you look for the signs and authorize an investigation into our concerns.**

We would also like to clarify that not all of us have heard every one of the allegations listed below, but we are signing because if even a fraction of these allegations are true, they are very serious and include behavior detrimental to the children. **We also ask that you use an extreme amount of discretion regarding the information contained in this letter,** as Ms. Mastriano has a prior **history of retaliation against both students and teachers** who have spoken about her mistreatment of them.

Racism: *In the attached UFT survey of P.S. 166 employees last year, 69.2% of the 39 respondents said they had heard “racist or disparaging comments made about students/adults who reside in public housing,” and 92.6% of those respondents said that the person who made those comments was the Principal.* We have heard multiple reports of Ms. Mastriano regularly displays prejudice against African-American and Asian-American students. For example, multiple staff have verified hearing her say things like:

- “I wish someone would level [building 589 Amsterdam, a NYCHA building adjacent to PS 166]. It only breeds dysfunction. Except when they rebuild it, it should have good role models in it too, so they can learn good behavior.”
- “Our school is becoming too Asian. I hate Asian people.”

These and other similar reports are unacceptable and create an inequitable and unjust learning environment for students, and need to be investigated further.

Abusive supervision: *In the attached UFT survey of P.S. 166 employees last year, 68.4% of respondents said they had seen a DoE staff member at P.S. 166 display menacing, threatening, or verbally abusive behavior towards students, and 86.2% said the person who displayed that behavior was the Principal. In that same survey, 76.3% of respondents said they “observed a classroom visitor/observer make negative comments about a student’s academic performance in the presence of students,” and 93.1% said the person who did so was the Principal.* Teachers and students have reported Ms Mastriano doing or saying the following:

- While observing a teacher, loudly commenting in front of the whole class, “This child doesn’t understand. They know nothing.”
- While commenting on the handwriting of a Kindergarten student in front of the whole class, “This is disgusting. I can’t even read this.”
- When speaking with teachers about how to treat a struggling 1st Grade student, “When are we going to start suspending him? He is not allowed to have crayons. You cannot be nice to him.”
- Ms. Mastriano allegedly pulled a student out of class to yell at them for something she heard they had said about her.

- There is a report of Ms. Mastriano denying a student access to the elevator without a doctor's note, even though they were wearing a walking boot for an injury.
- It was reported that Ms. Mastriano did not allow a kindergarten student to eat a piece of birthday cake in his home-packed lunch because she thought he was overweight. On the first day of school this year she took a donut away from a student for the same reason.

There are many, many other incidents of this variety that we could report, and several parents have stated they are willing to share their stories directly with you regarding ways they have been directly mistreated by Ms. Mastriano. In addition to abusive behavior towards students, we have also heard multiple reports of Ms. Mastriano demeaning school staff, DOE central staff, parents, school safety officers and students by calling them names such as "stupid", "ineffective", "disgusting." We have heard reports of her insulting teachers and staff for their political, religious, and cultural beliefs, both to their face and behind their backs. We have been told of how she regularly comments on student and staff's weight and dietary preferences. *This, too, is unacceptable and needs to be investigated, as it cultivates an abusive environment in the school.*

Authoritarian leadership: We have heard multiple reports that Ms. Mastriano does not respect the boundaries or personal needs of the staff she leads, and she also denies basic social/emotional needs for the students. For instance, members of the school community have reported that when staff members take off for religious reasons she will label it as "ridiculous" and complain about their work ethic. She obsessively calls, texts, and pages staff members multiple times within minutes to locate them, even sometimes after hours. It has been reported that she regularly enters rooms and offices when staff are not present to rummage through personal and professional materials, and some have alleged that she discards, steals, and rearranges items that do not belong to her. For most of the 2021/22 school year she would not allow students to play on the play structures at the playground (and lied to parents about why that was the case), and used recess as a bargaining chip for "good behavior." She has taken away developmentally-appropriate kindergarten learning traditions such as the Halloween party and the publishing parade while demanding they be replaced with "more math." She has removed as much of the "specials" from the curriculum as she can, even reassigning specials teachers (music, science, etc) away from these roles. It is reported that she has tried to eliminate all color from the school, including having all the walls painted over with gray (they were previously multi-colored) and insisting that teachers not print with fonts that are "cute" or colorful. She has, over time, all but eliminated the social/emotional programming from the school, cutting things like choice time for kindergarteners. There are currently reports that being able to talk at lunch has been revoked for certain grades for weeks on end when students have been "too loud" during their lunch period, and some students' lunches are being thrown out when they are caught talking. There were even instances last year in which students were told to stand up during lunch, or the whole grade was instructed to walk in circles during recess as a punishment for talking during lunch. *These allegations, if true, are harmful to teachers and students and create an environment that undermines dignity, creativity and growth. To the extent that Ms. Mastriano is responsible for them she must be held accountable.*

Unethical, erratic, and irresponsible behavior: There are numerous reports, about which several parents are willing to personally testify, of Ms. Mastriano lying about various controversies at the school over the years. For instance, during COVID, she instructed the custodian to throw away all the scooters that were left at the school during lockdowns. When parents called to inquire as to why their child's scooter was discarded, she blamed the custodian and lied, telling them she did not know why they were thrown away. One year she directed the Parent Coordinator to not allow kindergarten bussing the first week of school. When there was a complaint filed against her, she blamed the Parent Coordinator and took no responsibility for her role in the situation. An investigation was previously launched regarding multiple allegations published in the NY Post alleging that Ms. Mastriano had illegally discarded of DOE- and parent-purchased property, and there are reports that this practice has continued. Numerous staff and parents have reported that she pressures teachers to change the grades of students that she thinks have behavioral problems. We have heard reports that during school evaluations Ms. Mastriano has removed children deemed disruptive from the classrooms to ensure that the school receives inflated scores. It is also reported that Ms. Mastriano rarely completes assignments independently or on time and relies on support staff and central staff to monitor her progress to ensure completion of her responsibilities. Planned communication, speeches, and newsletters are all written and/or edited by other staff, and when support staff are not available to complete work for her she will pull teachers out of class so that they can complete her work for her. Staff have reported that she regularly comes to work late and clocks in for overtime without acknowledging her lateness. *Again, these alleged behaviors are unacceptable and need to be investigated, as they create a chaotic and anxious environment in the school.*

As you can see, there are many problems with Ms. Mastriano's leadership at P.S. 166. This has led to a toxic environment for teachers, students, and staff alike. After the 2018/19 school year, for instance, she had only a 9% trust rating among the staff. Last year alone, over 50 formal complaints were filed against Ms. Mastriano through SCI,

though to our knowledge only one such report was investigated by the former Superintendent. There was even a formal meeting with the previous D3 Superintendent, Christine Loughlin, in 2019 and, despite numerous allegations being brought forward in that meeting, no meaningful discipline or change came of it. **Teachers in the school remain miserable under her leadership to this day.** *In the attached UFT survey, over 80% of respondents said they were considering leaving P.S. 166, but 76.3% said a change in leadership at the school would directly impact their decision to leave the school.*

We had hoped more parents would be willing to sign on to this letter, but many expressed hesitation due to Ms. Mastriano's history of vindictiveness. At this time we are still collecting signatures and those below only represent about ¼ of the families at the school, since this is a sensitive document and we are having to be careful about how we share it with other parents. Even still, we co-sign this letter – knowing that it may cause problems for us or our children – because we believe the long-term consequences of Ms. Mastriano remaining in her role to be much worse.

We hope it has become clear that a thorough investigation of Ms. Mastriano's leadership is warranted, and **we believe that an investigation will make it clear that she is unfit to continue as Principal at P.S. 166.** We believe that good grades and academic performance are not enough. Children in school need to feel safe and need to learn to be respectful, inclusive, and honest individuals and this begins with the example set by the educators.

We know that your time is valuable, so we thank you for taking our concerns to heart and we look forward to the results of your investigation.

Sincerely,

Matthew Terrell



41 Anonymous Signers (who chose not to include names for fear of retribution on their children)