

## HB 6975 An Act Establishing a Task Force to Study Food Allergies in Schools

March 10, 2015

Dear Education Committee members:

I am writing to ask you to fully support HB 6975 as it will make a huge impact in the quality of life of our children in the public schools and improve their ability to learn, fully access the learning environment and to be included.

I am the mother of two children with multiple life-threatening food allergies and asthma. My children cannot eat eggs, dairy, peanuts or tree nuts or they risk anaphylaxis. I recently asked my daughter, Juliette, who is now in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, "what is the worst part of having food allergies in school?" Her response was "sitting alone, not being able to be with my friends". This statement resonated with me, too, as a parent.

When my daughter was in kindergarten something in my gut pushed me to check on her lunch situation at school as she hadn't related any stories about her peers. When I checked in on my daughter at lunch instead of sitting at a brightly colored round table with her peers, Juliette was seated at a brown desk that was pushed up against the wall, all alone, swinging her feet, facing the wall. I was absolutely crushed that this was how my daughter's safety protocols had been interpreted and implemented. Yes, she was safe, but she was also excluded and isolated. This is just one example of many stories any parent of children with life-threatening food allergies can tell you about the need for the task force to flesh out how schools can better implement prevention protocols.

We all know that inclusion is very important to the success of the learning environment and the child in that environment. When children are isolated they often become the target of bullying, and the child will often disengage from their school environment. Research shows that over 30% of children with food allergies have experienced bullying and 50% of the bullying related to their food allergies.

The current SDE guidelines do not help school districts implement inclusion with safety protocols, leaving school districts to opt for safety first. The task force must investigate the issue of inclusion and student well-being much as the current guidelines on Diabetes management offer: a whole section to this issue. These guidelines emphasize that an included and supported student is a student that is ready to learn and that must be foremost in our minds.

Districts need more guidance on how to make a policy become practices they can operationalize. I have spent the past year in BOE policy committee meetings, as a member of the public, listening and advising our school Board while they tried to make sense of the current State Guidelines on Food Allergy Management. Currently we have a single paragraph policy that has been on the books since 2004, never having been updated in 2006 or in 2012. How many other districts are like ours? The difficult

conversations that were had, the divided community that lashed out at prevention protocols, the overall lack of community awareness has led me to reach out to you today. I ask that you enact this bill to establish a task force to study life-threatening food allergies in our schools not only for the safety of our children but to continue to shift the paradigm away from 911 policies and toward those that promote safety, inclusion, and community support so our students are ready to learn.

I thank you all for your attention to this very important issue and for your dedication to all of Connecticut's students.

Sincerely,

Patricia Donovan

Fairfield, CT

Att: news articles on allergic reactions in our schools

**CTPOST.com** Wednesday, February 19, 2014

DANBURY -- After a couple of students were transported to the hospital because of allergic reactions to food brought into classrooms this winter, city educators have clamped down on their policies.

A food allergy results when the immune system mistakenly targets a harmless food protein as a threat and attacks it with antibodies. Allergic reactions can range from mild to severe or even fatal. The Danbury students who required hospital care suffered no permanent injury.

The [Board of Education](#) will examine a proposal to eliminate food brought to classrooms for birthday celebrations and replace it with other non-food activities.

"We don't expect to make any change this year, but we are trying to get more information," Schools Superintendent [Sal Pascarella](#) said. "Because the school nurses brought their concern to me, I have a moral imperative to review our policy and consider modifying it."

To start, the district will ensure all parents understand the current policy, which allows store-bought food to be brought for monthly classroom events.

The district will send a letter home this week to parents explaining what the policy is for bringing food to the schools.

The problem is that adults don't always follow the policy, instead bringing homemade food, with ingredients that are not all identified, to the classroom.

Food allergies affect up to 15 million people in the United States, including six million children of all ages, or an average of two in every classroom, according to the Food Allergy Research and [Education organization](#).

There are 552 food-allergic students in the [Danbury schools](#) out of nearly 11,000 in the district, according to [Kathleen O'Dowd](#), coordinator of health and nursing services for the district.

In addition, the district has orders for 272 EpiPens, which can inject doses of epinephrine to counter dangerous allergic reactions.

The schools' policy requires that if a student has a reaction and needs a shot of epinephrine, then the student must be transported to the hospital, observed for six hours and kept on steroids for a week.

O'Dowd surveyed other school districts in the area and learned there are no birthday food celebrations in Ridgefield, Wilton, New Canaan, Norwalk and Westport.

Some districts have occasional building-wide celebrations, with oversight from the principals, and some said school personnel are not responsible for determining whether foods or ingredients are safe.

O'Dowd noted, using FARE research, that peanut allergy is one of the most common allergies and the number of children with a peanut allergy has more than tripled between 1997 and 2008. Even a trace amount can cause a serious reaction.

As many as 16 percent to 18 percent of children with food allergies have had reactions in school, and 25 percent of reactions in school are from an undiagnosed food allergy, according to FARE.

While any food can cause a reaction, 90 percent of food allergies come from eight food sources: peanuts, tree nuts, eggs, wheat, milk, soy, fish and shellfish.

"The board has to protect all youngsters, and that's what we have to consider," Pascarella said. "My job is to make sure students are safe and that parents are knowledgeable."

O'Dowd noted there a lot of ways for a child to have access to forbidden foods.

For instance, a child with a life-threatening allergy could take home a food containing their allergen in a goody bag, children could trade forbidden treats or parents could bring forbidden foods into the classroom.

Pascarella said there would not be an end to the monthly celebrations, but if it is decided to stop snacks, O'Dowd has proposed a list of substitute ways for children to celebrate.

They include a birthday honor roll, a crown or sash they could wear for the day, 15 minutes extra of recess, a scavenger hunt or a free choice activity at the end of the day.

"Classroom celebrations are part of growing up, and there are many fun ways of celebrating safely without food," [John Lehr](#), CEO of FARE, said in an email. "Schools should be prepared to provide a safe and inclusive environment for students with food allergies, and one way of doing that is by reducing, restricting or eliminating foods in the classroom. With roughly two students in every classroom affected by food allergies, it's critically important that school staff -- and parents -- understand the measures we should take to protect students from potentially life-threatening reactions."

And, he said, if celebrations do include food, identified food allergens should be avoided.

Danbury school board member [David Metrena](#) said he has a child who went to the hospital with an allergic reaction with exposure to just one sesame seed.

"Education is a component that is vital," he said.

Pascarella said he will discuss the topic with the city's Parent Teacher organizations, and that any decision will not be made lightly.

"It is a very emotional topic. Parents remember having cupcakes, and they can't understand why they can't anymore," said [Kathleen Molinaro](#), chairwoman of the school board's policy committee reviewing the change. "I believe teachers would have a weight lifted off of their shoulders if children weren't exposed to potential allergens. What I can't get my head around is that often the first time it happens is at school."

**Stratfordstar.com**

**December 29, 2014**

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Janet Robinson announced to parents that the entire school district would be "peanut-free" as of Jan. 1, 2015, but after a number of responses from parents and a request from the Board of Education, she sent a second email to parents announcing that the peanut ban would be delayed until a public hearing could be held in January.

The follow-up email from Robinson said the public meeting would give the board the opportunity to hear concerns from the community.

"Because we, meaning the staff and the Board of Education, take the safety of all our children very seriously, we want to ensure that all ramifications of any such policy are clearly understood," Robinson stated in the second email. "We are postponing the implementation of the total peanut free schools until the Board of Education has the opportunity to hear concerns and weigh the decision."

In a follow-up with *The Star*, Robinson said that growing concerns by staff in the schools led to her initial decision.

“When the nurses all came to me and said, ‘This is an issue we’ve got to deal with,’ I listened to them,” Robinson said. “It was a sincere concern on the part of the nurses at the schools. However, I predicted there would be parents who would push back.”

Robinson said members of the Board of Education received enough emails and calls from parents that they requested she postpone the ban.

“The severity of the response to peanuts is what worries these nurses,” Robinson said. “I haven’t personally had to experience having my kid in a hospital because of allergies. But the possibility of even one child having to experience such a traumatic event ... well, it is part of my job to consider the safety of all children.”

### **Severe problem**

The district currently has a “Food Allergy Management Policy” that was revised in 2006. Although it addresses all allergies, it dedicates a special section to “The Peanut Problem,” indicating the severity of allergic reactions — including anaphylaxis, or closing of the airways — and the problem of the prevalence of peanuts in food.

“Peanuts, a cheap source of dietary protein predominantly ingested as peanut butter, have become one of the world’s most allergenic foods,” the document states. “They are progressively finding their way into more and more food products either directly, or by indirect contamination of food products during the manufacturing process.”

It further states that “students with documented life-threatening food allergies are considered disabled and are covered by the Disabilities Act,” and would therefore qualify for a 504 plan to create accommodations for the student. The policy offers guidelines to the schools for managing allergies in classrooms, cafeterias, health offices, and more. Procedures in the district currently vary from school to school.

According a report by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), there has been an 18% increase in food allergies among children between 1997 and 2007. Peanuts and tree nuts are the top allergens, along with milk and shellfish. Nut allergies, the report stated, tend to remain with people their whole life, whereas children tend to outgrow other allergies.

### **Parents are scared**

Jenna Right, co-administrator for the Stratford Food Allergy Families Facebook page, said managing severe nut allergies in the school is “really scary.” She has two children in the district — one at the already nut-free Stratford Academy and one at Wilcoxson Elementary. Her younger son, at Wilcoxson, has severe nut allergies and has experienced multiple incidents in which he ate or was exposed to nuts or nut ingredients at school, she said.

“If you have never had the experience of your throat closing up, it is the scariest thing,” Right said. “To not have control over what is happening to your child is really scary. My older son has no allergies and went to a nut-free preschool. I didn’t know anything about allergies at that time. I never complained.

"I feel someone who has a kid without allergies has no idea how blessed they are," Right said. "They can go on vacation wherever, or out to dinner and not worry. It's about keeping a child's life safe."

Right said that although her second grader can read ingredients and does advocate for himself, she feels elementary school age is too young to expect children to monitor nut ingredients or "self-carry" EpiPens, an emergency treatment for allergic reactions.

"A kid in elementary can't be a total advocate for that themselves," she said. "In the cafeteria he has to sit at a peanut-free table. But he can have reaction by contact. If he were to have a reaction, the medication is at the nurse's office. Could they react quickly enough?"

The public hearing on becoming a peanut-free district will be held in January. A date had not been announced at press time.

**TheRidgefieldPress.com**

**November 4, 2013**

Ridgefield, known for its scenic landscape, top-notch school district, and historic Main Street, could soon be recognized for something completely different — a pioneer for food allergy awareness.

A pair of Farmingville School parents, Lynne Maisonet and Monika Sobocinski, are spearheading the movement to increase awareness and communication around town, informing everyone from parents to school administrators to bus drivers to restaurant owners, about the causes and the symptoms of food allergies, specifically anaphylactic food allergies.

"We are not, in anyway, giving any legal or medical advice, but what we want to do is share our experiences and give support to families that have to deal with food allergies, and even families that don't have to deal with them daily, because it's very scary and you don't even know where to begin sometimes," Ms. Sobocinski said. "Once someone goes into anaphylactic shock, every minute counts."

The moms met when their sons, who both suffer from the highest level of anaphylaxis nut allergy, were in preschool together at St. Mary — a nut-free school.

Since then, the boys have made the leap into the public schools and are now third graders at Farmingville. Despite having to sit at a nut-free table during lunch and pack their lunch mostly everyday, the kids have adapted to their new surroundings.

However, the transition didn't come as easy for either parent.

"We were both extremely leery to try the public schools and it was because the district doesn't have any nut-free schools — we didn't know what we were getting into," Ms. Maisonet said.

“Public schools are intimidating for a child after coming from a small, cozy environment like St. Mary’s; it’s an awful, awful feeling putting kids on bus every day because you have no idea if the school knows what to do in case this happens.”

It turned out that the school district had everything under control, ranging from allergy policy and protocols to communication between nurses and a child’s parents to individualized emergency health care plans to prevention techniques.

Furthermore, teachers and principals are trained annually by each school nurse, to whom they delegate the administration of medications under the district’s guidelines.

“Kids with life-threatening allergies are safe in all elementary schools and all other schools in the district, and on field trips” said Farmingville Principal Susan Gately. “Every student has an individual health plan, put together by the nurses, so right from the very beginning, at kindergarten registration, these allergies are identified and the policy is personalized for each parent — the nurses are the point people and they develop the best possible plans with each student’s parents.”

The one aspect that was missing from the district’s policy regarding students with special health care needs was a technological component for communication.

Ms. Maisonet and Ms. Sobocinski have worked to correct that problem this year, meeting with Ms. Gately, the school’s nurse, Chris Giacometti, the district’s nursing coordinator, Birdie Rappuccio, and the district’s director of dining service, Janet Schmitz, [to create a section on Farmingville’s website that can serve as the homepage for concerned parents.](#)

Ms. Gately refers to it as “another avenue for access” for those seeking information about the district’s policy.

“The communication exists in all the schools,” she said. “We couldn’t have the successful track record we have unless this was happening everywhere. All we’ve done here at Farmingville is get ahead of the technology piece of communication, but everything else has been in place forever.”

Under the site’s wellness tab is a section called “Allergy Information” that hosts four smaller subsections, including the Board of Education’s policy on allergies of all kinds, basic information about anaphylaxis, questions and answers from parents, and parental responsibilities relating to emergency situations.

“We’re still learning at this point and our sons are in the third grade now,” Ms. Maisonet explained. “I think what we learned over the years is you can’t be afraid; you can’t be afraid to ask questions once, twice, three times until you’re comfortable...Now, parents, who are in our shoes and are new to the school district, have somewhere to go to find out information and seek out answers to their questions.”

Their next step is to get a similar website tab implemented for each of the district’s eight schools, and then eventually on the town’s website.

“We went to the school and found out how we can play a major role in educating everybody because it’s not about protecting our sons anymore — we want to be advocates for every child with food allergies,” Ms. Maisonet said.

“We just want to educate everybody and spread the word, not just to Farmingville, but to all the other schools, including the high school, so that parents and schools can share information with each other and continue this task of staying informed about the seriousness of these allergies. An anaphylactic allergy can happen at any time to any child, so everyone should know what to do in case it does.”

Ms. Gately believes this goal can definitely be obtained.

“I would expect that it will end up on every other website too,” she said. “Basically, what we’re doing is making information that’s always been available and customizing it and making it available at the individual school site, where parent’s search would naturally begin.”

Citing data from a study done by the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, Ms. Maisonet added that the number of children, 18 and under, with food allergies has gone up 50% in the past 10 years.

According to that same study, there are 15 million people in the United States living with a food allergy, while one out of every 13 kids under the age of 18 has a food allergy.

“It comes down to the fact that, in America right now, two children in every classroom has an allergy — those are the statistics, there’s no disputing that,” Ms. Sobocinski said.

Officials at Farmingville, and across the school district, are paying attention to the rise in food allergies.

“We’ve never had any emergencies regarding food allergies in my seven years,” Ms. Gately said. “With that said, we’re always staying on top of things; we’re always up to date and reviewing our policies — our nurses attend monthly meetings to address new information.”

Outside of the schools, the mothers did a two-mile walk on Oct. 20 that raised \$3,000 to bring awareness to anaphylactic allergies.

Their boys helped collect donations through their friends at school.

“With the increased allergies now, our children’s friends are aware of it, which is really amazing,” Ms. Sobocinski said. “You can’t expect a teacher to check over 20-plus snacks or lunches, but it’s really nice to know that there are kids in class that will look after their buddies even if they don’t have an allergy themselves — we hope that this will become the norm.”

Ms. Maisonet and Ms. Sobocinski both said that the worrying will never go away, but they are optimistic about the awareness spreading.

“We’ve been talking about it since our boys were in kindergarten — they were both very young, age two, when we each found out,” Ms. Sobocinski said. “And as they get older, we’ll have to worry about different things when they get to high school and go away to college; for allergy moms, that fear never goes away.”

Although fear over unknown and uncontrollable factors may never subside, these moms have a vision for Ridgefield — a vision that can already be a reality.

“This town is known for its schools and its historical Main Street, but this is a town that could be at the forefront for allergy awareness,” Ms. Maisonet said. “We don’t expect the world to change for us, and we wouldn’t want it to, but what we do want is to be able to teach kids and parents alike what can be done to address these allergies both in the classroom and outside of it.”

“Ridgefield Public Schools is on their game when it comes to allergy awareness,” Ms. Gately said. “Because what it comes down to is that it’s a child’s life and we’re in the business of taking care of the whole child — academically, physically, socially and mentally.”