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Englewood Charter School Teachers Unionize *Group Organizes To Preserve Quality Education Standards*

EDISON...Working at a charter school in Englewood, fourth-grade teacher Janine Ellis wants to protect the engaged classroom environment and close-knit community the teachers have cultivated since the kindergarten through grade five school opened in 1998. Many of the original teachers are still on board at the school, where students receive special attention based on small class size. Ellis and her colleagues voted to form a union with the American Federation of Teachers, a decision ratified by the state Public Employees Relations Commission.

“Giving the teachers a seat at the table is the best thing for the school,” said Ellis, a resident of Englewood, NJ. Teachers exercising their collective voice through unionizing will help make Englewood on the Palisades Charter School a better learning community, she said.

American Federation of Teachers New Jersey President William Lipkin welcomed the new union members. “The teachers at Englewood on the Palisades are dedicated to their students, their school and their community,” he said. “We are proud that they selected to unionize with the American Federation of Teachers and look forward to working with them to bargain a fair first contract.”

The teachers are busy working on identifying the professional changes they want to see in a contract. First-grade teacher Catherine Philley, of Teaneck, NJ, and her colleagues are calling for more collaboration from the school administration on classroom issues. “I am concerned that policies and changes are being made arbitrarily without input from teachers, staff and parents, and without proper research or advice from experts,” Philley said. “I strongly believe joining with the union will provide the assistance and organization we need.”

Mary Carpenter, a fifth grade teacher from Tenafly, NJ, explains that the school day was extended, but music, Spanish, art and computer programs were cut in half. “The issue is not about an extra 15 minutes, it is about involving the teaching staff in decisions that affect our students,” said Carpenter. “As educators we should be educating the total child and not only concentrating on classes that just boost test scores,” said Carpenter.

The American Federation of Teachers currently represents teachers in 150 charters nationwide. Englewood is one of five schools that filed for representation with AFT across the country in September. The 1.5 million-member union has active charter organizing projects in New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland and New Orleans.

The American Federation of Teachers New Jersey represents more than 30,000 education workers from pre-kindergarten through graduate school. consists of a higher education division including full-time and part-time faculty and staff at state ten state colleges and universities and six community colleges and a pre-kindergarten through 12 division represents teachers and support personnel in public and private schools throughout the state.

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