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Re: Grant Community Cares' position on the Grant Public School District and its current Board members

To the Grant Community:

It is important to those of us who care about our School District, and care about who is making decisions on behalf of our students, teachers and administration to pay attention to what has been actually happening with our Grant Public School Board. The contingent on the Board also known as "the four" – Ms. Rachal Gort, Ms. Sabrina Veltkamp-Blok, Mr. Richard Vance and President of the Board Ken Thorne - have engaged in what our group believes are violation of law including violations of the Open Meetings Act, defamation, and First Amendment violations. They have also instigated an investigation into matters that should have been first addressed by the agencies that monitor the programs.

The Four created issues to launch an investigation into school operations -- skirting District protocol or procedure -- to achieve their intended end. Grant Community Cares has retained me as counsel to address such tactics with the District, including the Superintendent "search" by the Board and First Amendment violations by Board members in their use and manipulation of their social media accounts. We believe there are facts that the community should be aware of that should affect their votes in the recall election, as well as affect the general health of our Schools. The longer these destructive, and what we believe are illegally obtained, decisions are allowed to be made by Ms. Gort, Mr. Vance, Ms. Veltkamp-Blok and Mr. Thorne, the more damage is done to our schools. The issues at stake are important and protecting the interests of our students is urgent.

The purpose of the Open Meetings' Act (OMA) is to promote governmental accountability by facilitating public access to official decision making, and to provide a means through which the general public may better understand issues and decisions of public concern. *Booth Newspapers, Inc. v University of Michigan Board of Regents*, 444 Mich 211, 223 (1993). In other words, the Board of Education cannot legally make decisions behind closed doors, then merely present them for vote without discussion or input from others at the public meeting. We

believe that the School Board regularly engages in violations of the OMA when it does not discuss with the full board nor consider public comment, prior to making extremely serious decisions and those which the OMA requires to be in open session.

Beginning with the Child and Adolescent Health Care(CAHC) debacle last summer, the School Board made decisions to close the CAHC prior to the meeting it was voted upon, and the matter was not even on the agenda for the meeting when the vote was quickly taken. This led to the battle to keep the Health Center operating for our students, and the battle over a mural created by one of our students and approved by those with authority to do so. It proved to be a national embarrassment.

This practice by Board President Thorne and others has continued for the most important of decisions affecting the District including refusing to execute school administrators contracts, the decision to oust Superintendent Zuver, the decision to launch a private investigation into school operations in the Special Education department, the decision to select Kevin Akin as the interim Superintendent, and the subsequent placement of Mr. Akin in the permanent Superintendent position. All of these decisions should have been put on the meeting agendas, been discussed thoroughly amongst all board members at the meetings in front of the public, and considered facts, policies and best practices for these important and long-lasting decisions that were made by president Thorne and those that align with him. They were not made in open session-- by design and in violation of the OMA.

Our group has addressed the Superintendent search with the District. (See March 25, 2024 letter) Despite our urging of conducting a reasonable search to lead our divisive District, decisions were made behind closed doors and were announced at the following meeting without further efforts. Our letter reached all board members prior to the Board meeting where the decision was supposedly being made. Apparently, our concerns were dismissed.

Our group has also addressed the inappropriate usage of social media by Board members Gort and Blok -- that not only has defamed and disparaged our members, but has violated the First Amendment of our Constitution. (See April 17, 2024 letter) We hope these concerns will be specifically addressed by those we have alleged have participated in these practices.

The Board's investigation into the Special Education program, when considering how Mr. Thorne went about seeking this investigation, was disruptive and not performed in a neutral and truth-seeking manner. A School Board is not tasked with managing school operations. However, if there was indeed an issue of wrongdoing within the special education department, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) should have been notified. NC RESA should have been immediately consulted, especially with the alleged concern about special ed funds, which this entity manages. This did not occur.

Instead, the Board's law firm was retained to perform this investigation into what Mr. Thorne and others aligned with him determined on their own to be illegal practices. Ms. Stephanie Dood, a special ed teacher, who was also tasked with several other responsibilities by the District, was publicly attacked for the "misuse of funds" after these Board members spoke up about these theories. There were irresponsible publications of inaccurate and disparaging documents by agents of certain Board members that led to irreparable damage to reputations and livelihoods. Though It was Ms. Dood's conduct that was put into question, Ms. Dood was not interviewed or presented with any documents or factual assertions regarding this matter.

Further, the practices that Ms. Dood and Superintendent Zuver followed and were called into question, had been protocol in the District for over a decade. Ms. Dood, and for that matter, Superintendent Zuver could have and would have described exactly what they did, why they did it, and how the practice has always been done by those in their same positions. For example, it was required by long standing GPS practice that the “teacher of record” sign the attendance records even if the teacher of record was on a medical or other long-term leave, even if at the time of signing, the records were weeks or months old. This occurred after vacation or sick days, or longer-term medical leaves. But they weren’t given any opportunity to do so before the investigation was closed, a report was issued, and an article was written interpreting such a report.

After getting wind of the allegations from the January special board meeting, NC RESA contacted MDE. NC RESA initiated the MDE/NC RESA audit visit based on the allegations made. Neither School Administration nor those on the Board who initiated the investigation contacted these agencies to self-report on the issue, or to request their expert assistance in reviewing the potential issues. After their audit, neither agency took further action to continue to dig into the financial matters of the special ed program or its practices. As the chatter in the community continued to bring up “*illegal use of funds*,” we checked again more recently with NC RESA and asked if they had found any financial problems with the way the GPS special education funds were used. Neither NC RESA nor the MDE found anything to look at further. The investigation instigated by the board President cost the district over \$25,000.

Also glossed over by those Board members who initiated the investigation into GPS special education issues, was that though he was involved as an Administrator in the Special Ed program, and was privy to documentation and inner workings of the program, program director/coordinator Kevin Akin was never questioned. His name is not mentioned in the Report, administrators interviewed as part of the investigation were not asked about Mr. Akin’s role, and it does not appear Mr. Akin was interviewed by investigators about his potential involvement with Ms. Dood’s actions or Superintendent Zuver decisions in this regard. For any investigation which intended to be comprehensive, it is concerning that this component was (likely purposely) omitted.

Also concerning to us, is that administrative contracts were held over the head of school administrators for months and months while District matters were heated and an investigation was going to be undertaken. Several of them were interviewed for special ed investigation. They were told that the information they gave in the investigation would be confidential. When the investigation finished, the contracts (that should have been offered and executed in the Summer of 2023, or certainly at least by the fall) suddenly appeared and were offered without any meaningful change in the contract language from the prior contract.

This investigation instigated by Mr. Thorne and supported by others in his group, was not brought in good faith. It was not initiated correctly with the agencies that oversee such matters; it was not performed in a neutral and comprehensive manner in that the two individuals targeted were not interviewed nor presented with documentation and asked questions about the allegations. Instead, we believe it was launched in retaliation against those who did not agree with their ideology and actions, it was used as justification to oust a beloved and very competent Superintendent, it was used to show the power of the President of the Board and those who align with him; and the results of the investigations and the way it was handled by the board members and their agents ***has disparaged and chilled employees and citizens of our School District from speaking out.***

Members of our community were confused and angry at how the investigation into the Special Ed program was conducted, and confused and angry about the Report (that was published on social media) and on the involvement of the MDE/NCRESA. A special meeting was scheduled (by whom and how many is not known) and took place on March 25, under the guise that the meeting was to clarify the investigation. Then-interim Superintendent Mr. Akin was chosen by (likely Mr. Thorne) as the spokesperson for the meeting. The meeting ended up reviewing the “monitoring” event initiated by NCRESA and while Mr. Akin took two prepared questions regarding the investigation, he was selective what he would and would not answer during the event. Any pointed questions about his status as Interim Superintendent or as “Director” of Special Ed was met with frustration and irritation by him rather than candid explanations. Those that attended the event did not leave with any more understanding about the matters of focus than with which they came.

The above behavior by the current members of our Board should not be acceptable to you as parents, as teachers and members of the community, in our opinion. Taking part and initiating the above shenanigans is not how a School Board can best serve our students. Grant Community Cares urges voters to consider how our School Board has conducted itself and the vitriol and divisiveness it has created – and the contributions to this mess by recalled vice president Rachal Gort and trustee Richard Vance. Please vote for candidates Mindy Conley and Lindsay Mahlich to help begin to turn our District around. We cannot wait until more damage to our District occurs.

Respectfully submitted,

Katherine Smith Kennedy

On behalf of Grant Community Cares

Ross Nelson

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