

Working Group on School Organizational Teams and Other
Issues Relating to the Reorganization of the Clark County
School District
Grant Sawyer State Office Building, Room 4401
555 East Washington Avenue
Las Vegas, Nevada

January 9th, 2018

Senator Harris, Senator Denis, and Members of the Committee,

In the Fall of 2016 as the Clark County School District Reorganization was approaching implementation, Ullis Newton Elementary in Henderson was exiting a tumultuous period that had seen office embezzlement and no less than nine administrators placed in the school over a two-year period. The school reorganization brought hope to the Newton Elementary Community, a unique local school that draws from long-established neighborhoods in the City of Henderson. After School Organizational Team (SOT) elections were held and the first meetings were called, the actions of CCSD staff January through April of 2017, caused concern that the school and community were not going to be adequately addressed by CCSD, the Associate Superintendent for Performance Zone 13, and CCSD superintendent Pat Skorkowsky. What followed was a vocal and sometimes contentious dispute resolution process that left the Newton Community and the Newton SOT stunned by the lack of a formal appeal process and external reviews.

The experiences of the 2016-17 Newton SOT lead us to suggest these possible changes to oversight of SOTs and the dispute resolution process:

- Creation of a support office for SOTs within CCSD, beyond the current Office of Community and Government Relations and FACES program
- Clearer definitions of roles and responsibilities of SOTs, Principals, and Associate Superintendents
- Evenly apply standards and procedures for principal hiring process for schools within performance zones
- Clarify “random” process for selection of Associate Superintendents for panel review
- Review of dispute process by external arbitrator

What follows is a detailed narrative of the experiences of the 2016-2017 Newton SOT.

Among the responsibilities of the SOT are to “assist and advise” the Associate Superintendent in the selection of a new principal. The heart of the issue at Newton was the hiring of a permanent principal to lead and return confidence to this community school. The SOT provided questions to the Assoc. Superintendent and helped interview the three, CCSD-chosen, candidates. Among the candidates was Newton’s acting principal. The school and community had rallied around the acting principal. He had brought a new confidence and sense of pride to the school from kindergarten students to 20-year teaching veterans. The students and teachers were making enormous strides to improve the morale and achievement within the school.

Through the interviews the choice was clear and the SOT made the recommendation to install the acting principal. After the interviews when the SOT made their recommendation, the Assoc. Superintendent told us that our selection had previously been involved in an investigation related to standardized test scores. The group acknowledged this information and indicated to the Assoc. Superintendent that the group was aware and willing to take on the responsibility of the selection. In conversation among the SOT afterwards, we each suggested that CCSD had a preferred candidate and it wasn’t our selection.

After the January 17th interview the SOT was told to expect an announcement within the next few weeks. At the January 26th SOT meeting we were told that the SOT’s selection for principal would have a second interview with the CCSD Superintendent the following day. The SOT learned that the interview was cancelled and not rescheduled. By February 6th most principal assignments for CCSD were announced. Newton’s position was not

among them. By the week of February 13th it became known among the faculty, staff, and community that the acting principal did not receive a second interview and would not be selected to lead Newton Elementary.

This information was passed to the community through the February 16th PTA meeting. Parent petitions began circulating the school and letters from parents *and* students were drafted to the Associate Superintendent and the CCSD Superintendent. On February 16th, after a month with no communication from the Assoc. Superintendent, the Newton SOT chair contacted the Assoc. Superintendent to ask for an update on the position and inform the Assoc. Superintendent that parents were circulating a petition. The Assoc. Superintendent said that the recommendation had been passed to the Superintendent and the decision was out of the Assoc. Superintendent's hands. When informed about the petition, the Assoc. Superintendent replied "I'm not going to tell you that you can't do that, but I don't know that it is going to make a difference."

On the afternoon of February 22nd, the Assoc. Superintendent asked for a snap faculty meeting. In that meeting he told those assembled that "We didn't hire your first choice and we did not hire your third choice." and that the new principal would be brought in on February 23rd to meet faculty/staff.

On the morning of February 23rd the CCSD selection for principal was announced but not introduced. No communication was made to the SOT regarding the choice of selection or reasoning behind the choice.

On the evening of February 23rd, more than 30 Newton Community members attended the CCSD Board of Trustees Meeting. Many spoke in public comment regarding the Newton principal selection and process. Some community attendees suggested that CCSD employees attempted to intimidate several away from speaking in the public comment period.

After the public comment period, several attendees including several members of the SOT were asked to conference in a separate room with Assoc. Superintendent Robert Mars and Chief Student Achievement Officer Michael Barton. For another hour and half the group sat with CCSD representatives asking for some clarification on the process and the choice. CCSD consistently suggested that confidentiality hindered them from providing more information. By the end of the meeting Assoc. Superintendent Mars agreed to attend a public meeting at Newton to answer questions.

On March 1st, Assoc. Superintendent Mars attended a meeting at Newton Elementary with more than 80 parents, students and community members. Members of the State PTA and the CCSEA were also in attendance. Mr. Mars, came alone, with no other CCSD support. Those in attendance found Mr. Mars responses inadequate and the meeting devolved past constructive discussion. The State PTA and CCSEA attendees were surprised at the level of acrimony shown by the community.

The following day on the morning of March 2nd the CCSD selection for principal was introduced to the faculty and staff.

The community and SOT continued to air their concerns at CCSD BOT meetings, as well as Henderson City Council, and CIC meetings. Several news items were published after these meetings.

(<https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/new-school-team-district-leaders-clash-principal-selection/> , <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/education/parents-fight-to-keep-interim-principal-at-newton-elementary/>)

The Chair and other members of the SOT met with John Vellardita of the CCSEA and Stephen Augspurger of the CCASA. Vellardita and Augspurger expressed their concern and agreed to set up a direct meeting with CCSD Superintendent Pat Skorkowsky.

On March 10th the Newton SOT met with Superintendent Skorkowsky and Chief Instruction Officer Mike Barton facilitated by Mr.'s Vellardita and Augspurger. In that meeting the members of the SOT shared the history of issues at Newton, handed over 300 letters of support for the acting principal from faculty, staff, students, and community members, and were given assurances that a resolution that would placate everyone would be reached.

The Newton Community continued to make phone calls and write letters to CCSD throughout March. On April 4th the SOT received a memo from the Superintendent's office stating that no changes would be made to the principal selection at Newton Elementary.

Proposed changes to dispute resolution process

The Newton community welcomes positive changes to the dispute resolution process for school Plans of Operation, but seeks a clearer, more transparent process for disputes in the selection of principals.

In the experiences of the Newton SOT, we found that fiat decision from the Superintendent on hiring and lack of communication and accountability at the Associate Superintendent level to be the most pressing issues.

The proposed changes place the responsibility for resolution in a panel of Assoc. Superintendents rather than the local Associate Superintendent. We welcome the proposal and the method of selection for the panel, but asks for a clearer explanation of the method of "random" selection for the review panel by CCSD.

While confidentiality in hiring processes should be protected in cases of principal selection, we find the proposed need for confidentiality in the review of disputes related to school Plans of Operation, unrelated to Human Resources issues, to be burdensome and counter to the spirit of community involvement espoused in the reorganization bill.

External review by a third-party arbitrator, involvement of state and local educator and administrator unions representatives, and open public arbitration are all options that would allow more open decision making outside of the proposed CCSD staff-centered process.

The establishment of an internal CCSD Office dedicated to SOT outreach and assistance would help the groups better navigate the complicated CCSD bureaucracy that many SOT members are not prepared to engage.

We thank the committee for allowing us to tell our story. We hope that this Working Group and CCSD can make the necessary improvements to enable our SOTs, teachers and students to be truly successful within this reorganization.

Respectfully submitted,

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