

Statement Re: Anonymous Letter

Every day nearly 5,600 students attend schools in Sweetwater County School District Number One. It is to those students that the men and women serving on the District's school board, serving as District administrators, and serving as District teachers and staff dedicate their efforts. Increasingly, however, we see evidence of attempts to drive wedges between these dedicated individuals and their duties.

Most recently, an anonymous letter setting forth a list of grievances against myself and the District was circulated to Board Members, District administrators, teachers and staff, and community members. The problem with anonymous complaints is that they cut-off any opportunity to respond to the author or try to resolve the author's concerns. The effort to write a letter filled with false information and leave it unsigned signifies no credibility to the authors and a lack of respect to the readers.

When someone refuses to put their signature to an accusation, it is likely to mean that the sender has a personal problem or a nefarious agenda, rather than the existence of a legitimate organizational issue that needs to be resolved. This letter lacks both factual accuracy and is riddled with personal attacks, which lends to the conclusion that the author's intent was to spread discord and fan the flames of a personal agenda. The letter does not propose solutions or initiate a dialogue, rather it publicly disparages the members of this District that work hard for our students.

Ordinarily, I would not respond to such insults. As a public figure, I expect to sometimes be the misplaced target of an individual's dissatisfaction with their job, their student's level of achievement, or any other number of matters. However, the contents of this letter, and the way it was distributed, seek to undermine the hard work of District staff and disparage the quality of the education our students receive, so it is incumbent upon myself, as Superintendent of Schools, to respond to the allegations, clear up any fallacies, and extend my support to District administrators, teachers, and staff.

The author claims to hear nothing but complaints from parents, administrators, teachers, and staff, claiming that employees are subject to retaliation, leaving morale to suffer and employees to fear for their jobs. I cannot speak to individual feelings, but any fear over retaliation or fear over losing a job for no reason is misplaced. The District has strict policies and procedures in place to prevent such unwarranted discipline or terminations. The author appears to be painting with a wide brush.

I am fortunate to be in a position where I can work with all employees on a daily basis, and find it to be a positive experience. I have a scheduled monthly meeting with the Board Chair and the President of the SEA to address any issues that surface amongst District staff, including morale. Any concern is addressed during these meetings. However, the complaints raised in the recent anonymous letter have not been raised by SEA during those meetings. I am forced to be skeptical when I read claims that District employees "fear for their jobs" or are subject to retaliation. It is inconsistent that a feeling of intimidation and fear exists when at several board meetings, we've had teachers publicly approach the board and offer critical comments.

Staff members simply are not terminated on a whim or "in retaliation" as the author claims. The process by which an employee of this District is disciplined is a long and arduous process created to ensure no staff member is terminated without a justifiable reason. A process that affords the employee reasonable opportunities to improve any deficits in their performance. Recently, the Wyoming Supreme Court affirmed the validity of the District's practices in upholding the dismissal of an employee for misconduct.

The District provides continuous training for our teachers and staff. When we hire a new teacher, we are hiring a certified professional who has served in schools under supervision. But the District then continues to assist that teacher with substantial training for both new and continuing employees. In addition, new employees are offered the opportunity to participate in a Teacher Assistance Program. When an employee is struggling or potentially violating District policy, the District conducts a thorough investigation to protect the District and the

employee. While the District is prohibited by law from disclosing specifics of individual personnel matters, the process is careful and respects employees due process rights and the right of the public to expect the highest standards from District employees, whether they are at-will employees under Wyoming law or certified staff members entitled to a greater legal protection for their employment. Any allegation that an incident is not investigated or that no process is followed prior to disciplining or terminating an employee is false.

The author also asserts that financial decisions are made without sufficient knowledge of District finances. Public education in Wyoming faces many challenges, not the least of them being the financial pressure from reduced funding from the Wyoming Legislature. Despite the challenges, the District has implemented improvements to key curriculum in mathematics and is moving forward with new English programs. Development of each curriculum is an inclusive process that has involved the public, teachers, and administrators.

The state's funding formula and revenue stream for education create the boundaries that the Board of Trustees must meet to literally balance the District's checkbook. Presently, 83% of the District's budget is allocated for wages and benefits for employees. The remaining 17% is all that is left for every other expense of the District. Unless the legislature makes significant changes and pays the District money owed from unpaid cost adjustments and changes to the funding model, the District faces an estimated \$3.1 million deficit by the 2019-2020 school year.

In an effort to address the legislative cuts, salaries were frozen for the 2016-2017 school year. The author claims that the funds spent on recent bonuses or retirement incentives were "foolishly spent" and argues that staffing should have been increased for the 2017-2018 school year. It is not a sound hiring practice to knowingly hire a quality employee and then reduce the position the following year. I disagree those funds were foolishly spent. The District was fortunate to find ourselves in a position to reward the great efforts of our staff with bonuses and thank them for the continued support during this difficult time. This one-time money came from a data correction found in the state funding model in the amount of \$406,999.02; combined with funds from reassigned and absorbed paraprofessional positions (\$175,069.45); and unused funds from the Sick Leave Incentive payout for certified staff (\$49,000) totaling \$693,105.47 including grant funds. By state statute, the District general fund can carryover a maximum of 15% of our foundation guarantee amount to the following school year. Any funds over the 15% maximum would need to be returned to the state. Said differently, we use it or lose it. Any funds over the 15% maximum cannot be carried over to the following year. Through cost saving efforts made during the past year, the District chose to provide the 990 employees a small thank you for their efforts, an action I would recommend to the Board of Education again if the opportunity should arise. The future of school funding is uncertain with recalibration efforts occurring again. By granting experience steps on the salary schedules, the District may not be able to sustain the cost over future years. Thus, the one-time money provided a bonus to employees.

To keep children within their home schools, class sizes may vary from building to building, within allowable standards. At the secondary level, student enrollment numbers are fairly steady from last year to this year. However, the number of teachers has decreased in these buildings due to budget constraints. The result is an increase in class size. The District's administrators, teachers, and myself have all been involved in numerous steps to identify relief for overcrowding at Rock Springs High School. While working to identify solutions, it was important to ensure that students have access to the electives and courses necessary to remain on track for graduation, the Board approved a temporary request to increase the number of students in classrooms on an "as needed basis" for the remainder of the 2017-2018 school year. As it stands, staffing is appropriate to keep class size at levels that comply with state law. The District is not increasing class size across the board, however, this may change pending any further legislative cuts to education.

The author then claims to hear "extreme frustration" concerning the slow pace of construction and opening of the new Farson-Eden School. The new Farson Eden K-12 school was able to open for the beginning of the 2017-2018 School Year despite a number of complications inherent in construction of the new school and all

the necessary water, sewer and other infrastructure that is unique to that facility. The building and grounds were inspected by the State Fire Marshall's office and an occupancy permit was issued to permit the building to be occupied for classrooms to be set up and school to open. While the start of school was postponed by one day, it was after careful consideration by the District to allow for the implementation of additional safety measures. The safety of our students takes precedence and no injuries have been reported. I understand some frustration has been expressed over the inconvenience in student drop off and pick up, but those will be remedied in due time. Rather than focus on the negative, I wish to express my thanks to Dan Selleroli, District Director of Facilities, for his diligence and dedication to making this new school an exciting new addition to the Farson-Eden Community. The educational experiences we can offer those students far outweigh the initial growing pains in opening.

Finally, the anonymous letter attacks the District's provision of special services, alleging students are allowed to "slip through the cracks" without accountability. The provision of special education is mandated by the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA sets the level of services that a student is to receive and outlines procedures for resolving disagreements around those services. One of those procedures is to file a complaint with the State Department of Education.

I spoke earlier about attempts to drive wedges between our dedicated staff members and their duties, and believe that this is one of those areas. The most productive process to resolve matters in the services the District provides to students receiving special education is to discuss the issue with the student's IEP team. We are seeing complaints filed with the state prior to any dialogue or attempt at resolution taking place at the school level, cutting off any ability for the school to respond and take action. Corrective action is impossible to implement before the issue is brought to the school's attention, leaving the student caught in the middle.

Our Special Services Director has worked tirelessly to ensure students eligible for special education are receiving the services mandated by the IDEA. She comes to this position after working 16 years in the District as a special education teacher and brings the knowledge and dedication necessary to meet the unique demands of her position. She came into this position during a critical time, entrusted to implement new policies to reflect regulatory developments. She has risen to the challenge, investing incredible amounts of time and effort to revising special services policy, training administrators and staff, attending IEP meetings, and meeting with parents. She has worked closely with the state Department of Education to secure favorable outcomes to the complaints that have been filed, to provide outside training (at no cost to the District) to our administrators and special services staff, and continues to work toward the betterment of the special services department.

In conclusion, I wish to offer my gratitude and recognize the efforts of the District administrators, teachers and staff that show up day in and day out, working tirelessly to meet the education needs of our students. I recognize the sacrifices they make, and commend them on their performance and willingness to place students first despite the economic challenges the District is facing.

I also want to thank the Board for supporting me as I lead the District to the best of my ability. Sweetwater County is a great place to raise a family and receive an education in the school system. Our teachers and all staff give 100% daily to the students walking through each school door.

I wish to issue a request to any parent, district employee, or member of the community with concerns over the direction of this District; I invite you to voice your concerns in a manner and format that is conducive to response and to resolving those concerns. We need to collaborate and come together for the best interests of our children.

Citizens are encouraged to contact the District, take part in committees, and continue to feel welcome at school events. Last year, the District and community members proactively worked jointly in the Cost Savings Task Force. The budget cuts to education were painful and the input from community members aided the District in making tough decisions. The District Strategic Plan will be revisited this year and all stakeholders are

encouraged to take part in this effort. This plan was last created in March 2013 and outlines the future goals and priorities of the District. It is best practice to continuously evaluate student outcomes and priorities for the District. Pending the outcome of the state hired consulting firm's recommendation on school funding to the legislature, the District may be facing another funding shortfall as we prepare for the next two years. As part of the strategic planning process, cost saving efforts will once again be needed.

Rather than focus on the positive accomplishments of the District, some are trying to distract the conversation to avoid acknowledging the real issues that we will face, driven by the financial realities. We all want positive student achievement with support from parents, teachers, staff, and the community. The District invites all interested parties to join in that effort.

By coming together, we can make a difference.



Kelly McGovern
Superintendent of Schools