

Statement - Ember Conley, Ed.D

When I was preparing for the interview process for the position of Superintendent of Mesa Public Schools, I studied the data and determined there was a need to dramatically improve student performance. In March 2018 I proposed a bold plan to the School Board and community that would focus on improving lagging performance in 3rd-grade reading, 8th-grade math, 11th grade English language arts and more importantly, high school graduation rates. That message resonated with the community as a way to fulfill the ideal of a district that aspired to be a "beacon of excellence."

With a supportive board and an eager administrative team, my team started to communicate these goals to the over 10,000 staff members at MPS. Everyone was asked to focus on the success of our students. Whether you were a member of the custodial staff or a bus driver, one of our teachers and counselors, or our building administrators and central office staff, our focus was to be on the students. The plan was recognized for its exemplary work when it received the Golden Achievement Award from the National School Public Relations Association. More importantly, the communications plan quickly changed the culture of the district to one of shared accountability and focus on student success and well-being.

Those early months revealed something that could only be realized by seasoned administrators -- there were some established practices at the district that needed to change and some immediate gaps that needed to be filled. One of the first things we did was to repurpose the \$2 million special projects fund and allocate those funds to add 20 much-needed teachers.

There was another urgent matter regarding the state of special education. In a 2016 letter from the Department of Education, it stated that MPS needed to change special education programs to come into compliance with the IDEA inclusionary framework. One such change to immediately meet federal compliance and avoid potential punitive action was the establishment of neighborhood preschools. Using current funding and allocating resources differently, there was an increase in the number of preschool students using the inclusionary model of special education.

In those first few months, three members of the Superintendent's staff announced their retirement. Rather than simply fill the positions, I worked with the board to restructure district leadership and presented the initial plan to the board at a meeting in November 2018. With a commitment to keep the changes to the Maintenance and Operations budget neutral, the board acknowledged the new senior team. When building the team, I discovered another established practice that required attention -- there was no salary schedule for the most senior administrators and in order to attract the best people, an annual bonus structure had been adopted.

I worked with team members from Human Resources to fill 93% of all positions internally and while the total compensation for the newly expanded team was higher than in the past, by reducing the number of administrative support staff and relying on grant money, we kept the changes to the M&O budget neutral. Following another long-standing practice, the bonus structure of the team was approved in formal meetings and the cabinet budgets were communicated with some individual board members during meetings in the district office.

The new team quickly adopted the goals I was hired to achieve and every key performance

indicator increased, some reaching five-year highs. These key indicators included third-grade reading, 8th-grade math, 11th grade English language arts, and high school graduation rates. For example, high school graduation increased from 76% to 82%. The district had eight D/F schools when I started and at the end of my tenure, there were only two F schools.

These results did more than just benefit our students - they resulted in \$2.1 million from the state for results-based funding in 2018 and received \$4.01 million in 2019, largely in part by moving from eight D/F schools to two F schools in one year. The team looked beyond student performance and focused on students' social and emotional needs, all while keeping a keen eye on the bottom line. One example is updated transportation routes in accordance with the American Pediatric Association recommendation leading to later start times for teenagers to assist and support mental well-being. We were able to adjust school start times and with the new bus routes were able to save the district \$1.2 million annually. The team also focused on Federal Title One and Maintenance and Operations budgets were adjusted and aligned to facilitate the hiring of 35 elementary counselors to improve student social-emotional wellness.

As a result, the Arizona Medical Association awarded me the Public Health Achievement Award and I accepted the honor on behalf of the hard-working administrators, health professionals, and counselors that continue to improve the social and emotional well-being of our students.

Cost savings and improved performance did not end there. My team appealed to an Arizona Department of Education audit finding for the 2016-18 ADM audit which found that the district was overpaid by \$375,692. My team appealed this amount resulting in a savings of over \$180,000.

Yet, in June of 2019, our team initiated a review to examine the HR process to ensure compensation at all levels of the organization would be properly approved by the governing board. This information was shared with board leadership during a leadership planning meeting in June 2019. During October 2019, the governing board was advised that certain practices needed to be changed based upon presentations made by an attorney group to all Arizona School Administrators. This included thousands of stipends and extra pay that had not been previously approved. This practice was long-standing and was not unique to Mesa Public Schools and was also followed by many districts throughout Arizona. In fact, the Arizona Public Schools Human Resource Association had been discussing this issue as each district throughout the state had different practices. Large districts, like Mesa Public Schools, are not unlike large businesses with half-billion-dollar budgets and thousands of employees. MPS's business, human resource, and legal staff were always reviewing practices to ensure compliance and competence to the applicable laws.

Significant partnerships were developed to provide additional funds and in-kind contributions for the benefit of the Mesa Public Schools. For instance, partnerships with ASU included professional development opportunities and a pipeline for classroom teachers with more than 70 student teachers.

The team moved from urgent needs to long-term planning. Two initiatives developed during my tenure included a master facility plan and a strategic plan. The comprehensive master facility plan tracks repairs and maintenance of district buildings in order to wisely plan and utilize bond dollars accordingly. This was the first time Mesa Public Schools had developed a master facility

plan to increase fiscal responsibility. The second initiative was to develop a strategic plan that aligned with the portrait of a graduate; a first strategic plan since 2010. It included input from thousands of constituents in order for the plan to represent the values and desired learning outcomes for students.

With regard to the compensation and reporting to the governing board, I had a team of professionals guiding decisions. As a relatively new superintendent, I relied on my team to assist me with some of the decisions of the office. When information seemed in conflict with what was in practice, I would personally research past practices and how the district reported compensation and cabinet-level positions. This led to the policy review I initiated in June of 2019 and the subsequent report to the board in October.

In my resignation letter, I spoke of personal challenges including the passing of my father and a close friend, my role as the primary caregiver and decision-maker for my mother, coupled with an unexpected illness and surgery. These difficulties coupled with the demands of the superintendent job are ultimately what led to my resignation. There is no mystery or wrongdoing.

This situation in Mesa has resulted in hundreds of hours being taken away from educating the students and has eroded the public trust. The board members and volunteer elected officials all have good intentions to serve the constituents and these situations are highly complex and complicated requiring deep knowledge of law, policy, and finance coupled with the political pressures from neighbors, families and church values. The members of the board are good, kind individuals following a system that requires sophisticated board knowledge and governance. In times of immense changes in education, it is understandable that these situations cause hardship to all involved.

It is critical that the community continues to support the hard-working administrators, the board and the front line professionals that are tasked with the education of our students. To do otherwise would be a disservice to the community and the hard work of all the dedicated people that have chosen to commit their lives to create a district that is a beacon of excellence that cultivates our most precious resource: our students.

It is troubling to read reports of wrong-doing or deception on the part of the Superintendent, which are false and misleading. Superintendents work at the pleasure of the governing board. It is not uncommon for differences of opinion to occur especially when affecting dramatic change. I have been a career educator for the past 25 years having left a lucrative business in the private sector. I am a champion for student learning, an expert in education and policy, and have proven business acumen. Because the work in education is changing so rapidly, many antiquated systems are causing hardships for superintendents and governing boards across the US. Could it be time for local educators and administrators to demand changes to this governance model if the desire is to prepare students for the demands of the workforce?

The senior team we assembled should be celebrated for all of the improvement in student achievement, social-emotional wellbeing, and fiscal responsibility. The hard-working professionals and career educators who were focused and dedicated to our students should be celebrated. These professionals choose to work as educators not to enrich themselves, but to make a difference in our community.