

# Wrenshall School Board delays decision on accepting petition costs

By Dylan Sherman  
Cloquet Pine Journal

WRENSHALL — Wrenshall's School Board decided to table a decision on whether to accept the costs incurred with a petition to reject an appointed board member from last year, during its meeting Monday, March 14.

The item was placed on the agenda after the board's committee of the whole meeting Wednesday, March 9, when board member Debra Washenky asked to vote on the topic.

The petition in question was to reject an appointed school board member, Bill Dian, after Michelle Blanchard left the board to become principal last fall, creating a vacancy.

In September, some residents in the Wrenshall District felt the appointment was rushed and lacked transparency, leading to them starting and successfully organizing the petition.

In the meetings following the recall petition, some members of the public have used their opportunity for public comment to ask the board why the district had to use its staff to verify the petition.

They argue it was taxpayer money, through district employee time and lawyer fees, that paid for verifying the petition.

Time and legal fees added up to \$600 worth of costs for the district.

State statute for the rejection of appointed board members requires the petitioner to submit filings to a filing officer, which in the school district's case is the district clerk.

According to the state statute, it is then up to the filing officer to verify the petition.

Board member Ben Johnson presented information to the board during the meeting outlining research he had done regarding the issue.

"It states in statute that school boards are to provide an election clerk ... we had to provide someone to verify the signatures," he said.

Johnson spoke with the county and even got an opinion from the Minnesota Secretary of State's Office, which said it was within the clerk's job description to verify the signatures.

The district's clerk is also the election contact for the district.

"This is all within the realm of (the clerk's) job description," he said.

The district did consult with the county when the petition was originally submitted and was told it was the district's responsibility to verify the signatures, and forwarded the statute to back up the claims.

County Auditor Kevin DeVriendt said the petition was outside the scope of the county's work after consulting with the secretary of state's office.

"We tried to be helpful in the situation, but (we are) not in a place to be the final authority on this matter," he said in an email.

Tony Sheda, a Wrenshall resident who is vehemently against the district paying for verifying the petition, said the information provided by Johnson was just opinions and he wanted something "black and white" saying the district has to cover the expenses.

"We had to pay for a private petition," he said.

Sheda added he would drop the issue if the district had it in writing that it is meant to cover the costs of the verifying the petition.

After hearing the information from Johnson and points from Sheda, Board Chair Misty Bergman said the district has to learn from this and move forward.

"I want it to be done too, but done right," she said. "We're having so many things presented to us that we just clar-

ify, to know we are doing the right thing."

Denise North, a teacher in the district, said despite some people disagreeing with the outcome of the petition, that is how democracy works.

"It looks retaliatory," she said "Are you going to retaliate for people having a voice in the community?"

While the issue has been tabled until the next meeting in April, Superintendent Kimberly Belcastro said she wants to see the issue resolved as quickly as possible.

Belcastro told the board, and those in attendance, that more costs are being accrued as the clerk has to continue to provide information on the petition.

In terms of public interest in the issue, Belcastro said it has only been a couple of people who feel the district should not pay for verifying the petition.

"I hope the board will put it to bed," she said.

# Wrenshall Schools to update harassment, violence policy after complaint

By Dylan Sherman  
Cloquet Pine Journal

WRENSHALL — The Wrenshall School Board will vote on updating its harassment and violence reporting policy at its next meeting after an Office of Civil Rights complaint was filed against the district.

Superintendent Kimberly Belcastro informed the board, during its committee of the whole meeting Wednesday, March 9, that it is important for the district

to reexamine its policies so that they are compliant with the law.

The specific details of the complaint are not yet public as the board has not had the chance to meet with the district's legal council, said Rosy Bradley, Wrenshall's district office clerk.

The complaint stemmed from a student who felt bullied by the district and comes after a handful of students sent letters to the board last month, according to Belcastro. The board mem-

bers responded to the students at the February meeting by stating they heard them and planned to hold an inclusivity training session.

This was the district's first ever complaint of this nature, according to Belcastro, and the district is working alongside its legal council to remedy the complaint as quickly as possible.

Belcastro said the district has already worked with the student to make the appropriate accommodation for them.

"We are trying to be inclusive of every child that comes to our school," she said.

The situation can sometimes be difficult when trying to meet the needs of the law, student safety and even community perception, Belcastro said.

Within the proposed policy, Belcastro would be the designated human rights officer as the superintendent. The school principal would be in charge of receiving and handling the reports

of harassment or violence made in the district.

The district's lawyer told Belcastro that updating the policies with procedures will allow the district to tackle other issues that come up.

"We want to make sure our policies are in order so that we are handling things appropriately," she said.

Board member Ben Johnson said the inclusivity training the district held last month enforced

the idea of interacting with the students who might feel discriminated against.

"The biggest thing (the instructor) was hoping for was for us to start a conversation with those kids," he said. "So that those kids feel like they are being listened to."

Belcastro thanked the board that they were taking the complaint seriously.

A vote on the policy was tabled at the board's regular meeting on Monday, March 14.

## NEWS BRIEF

### Judge issues order in child care case

CARLTON — A judge's order has five children involved in a Carlton County child care case remaining in temporary custody of Carlton County Public Health and Human Services, as of March 8.

Judge Rebekka Stumme's order includes findings that state it is in the best interest of the children to remain in out of home placement until the legal custodian is able to provide a safe

environment.

Continued custody of the children by the legal custodian is contrary to the best interests of the children, according to the court documents.

The latest order pertains to five of the 10 children removed from their legal homes in January after allegations of abuse were made against two mothers. The Pine Journal is not identifying the women to protect the identities of the children.

The next hearing in the case is scheduled for 11 a.m. April 5.

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