

SCHOOL: Recent administration and district office resignations spark comments at public forum

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the school found a leader that could help navigate them through a difficult journey, referring to allegations of racial injustice that were made last year. "Everyone is stressed out in the school. The kids have reported they can feel the tension. There is gossip being spread about teachers leaving and so much more. The kids are the people who suffer in the end. I'm begging the board to save our school. Save our teachers. Save our superintendent." She added that she felt superintendent Foley has "proven to be dedicated to change" saying, "It would be a great loss to the district to let her go without fighting to keep her."

Community member, Joel Hogberg, addressed his concern regarding the district office asking why people are resigning. He said that there are rumors circulating that more staff members may be fired. "With these rumors getting out, our teachers and staff are fearful for their jobs and their wellbeing and more stress is being added to their plates," he said. "I would push for an investigation into what is going on and why the

district office staff members have felt compelled to leave."

At that, board chair Lisa Nos-Tollefson stopped Hogberg from speaking and school board member Dan Peterson added, "We're not going to put anyone on trial." Hogberg said that he respectfully disagrees with the board choosing to silence him. At that, the room gave Hogberg a loud round of applause.

Then Jason Vinaja chose to speak on his behalf saying that it is his hope that the school board will endeavor to protect the staff, students and community. "I am saddened to witness the continuous dismantling of our district - morally, ethically, emotionally, and relationally. It wounds my soul to say it is a sad day to be a Dragon ... the staff and community are looking to you for humility, stability and leadership." At that, the room filled with teachers and parents gave Vinaja a standing round of applause.

Nos-Tollefson pounded her gavel three times to gain control of the room.

Wendy Liebel, a former school board member who recently resigned, spoke saying that she encourages the school board to embrace the

same sort of diversity they have recently implemented and added, "You have an opportunity to make a difference in the culture and what happens in the walls of our school."

Teacher Cassander Olson spoke with concerns about administrative turnover and hiring practices.

The public forum concluded, and Nos-Tollefson thanked everyone saying, "Your words are important and we do hear you."

DISCUSSION OF HIRING NEW SUPERINTENDENT

Dialogue took place among board members regarding moving forward in the hiring process of a new superintendent. Board member, Lezlie Sauter, suggested the district hold public forums to get input on what the community wants in a superintendent. Nos-Tollefson suggested an online survey, and board member, Dan Peterson, suggested doing a staff survey. Ames brought up the option of hiring an outside consultant.

Sauter noted, "We have to put our best foot forward. What we put out there, we're going to attract ... we have to be a good role model for

this community if we're going to attract a good leader for the district."

Board member, Becci Palmblade, spoke in support of the current superintendent saying, "I think it's important to state that the current superintendent never did resign but did say she would not take a contract at this time." She said the board could "still salvage" the progress they've made and keep some traction going if they were interested in talking to each other. "Do we really have to go through with the hiring process? Can we fix what needs to be fixed? If we're not going to support the people we hire, we're not going to make any traction. There are so many layers; I wish you would do your research to find out what's really going on."

In light of questions circulating around the superintendent, a look into Foley's past employment revealed that Foley got her start in the Foley school district, and served in numerous Minnesota schools including the St. Cloud, Warroad and Big Lake school districts as well as a number of charter schools.

According to a 2018 St. Cloud Times article,

Foley was reassigned as principal at Westwood Elementary School in St. Cloud in fall 2012 and was put on administrative leave in April 2013 amid complaints about her leadership. In July 2013, the article stated, the St. Cloud School Board approved a settlement with Foley that ended her tenure with the district while allowing her to collect as much as \$271,497 in wages and benefits over the following two years. Foley was put on paid administrative leave in April amid complaints about her leadership, which the school board said created "an atmosphere of fear and intimidation" among some faculty and staff. She was in her 19th year as a principal in the St. Cloud school district and in her first as Westwood principal.

RESOLUTION PASSED CONCERNING REDUCTION IN PROGRAMS/POSITIONS

A resolution was unanimously passed to allow administration to recommend reductions in programs and positions based on school enrollment and the 2022-23 budgeting process.

Superintendent Foley noted, "Each year, there is a possibility that as we get enrollment num-

bers that we won't have enough students to have all the programs ... we should be OK, but this is something school boards have to do."

School board member, Candice Ames, commented, "I agree that this is customary; however, I have heard what you have been saying tonight, and I think it's extremely important that there will be no surprises ... we need involvement from everyone that this is implemented in a professional manner that respects all. Some of you have addressed the hemorrhaging of the district office and some of the other sports in the school and we can't tolerate that ... know that we will expect that this will be a very ethical process with lots of steps so there won't be any surprises." At that, Ames was given a round of applause from those present at the meeting.

TEACHER CONTRACT AGREEMENT

Also at the board meeting it was acknowledged that the contract with the teachers has now reached an agreement. There was little discussion around the topic at the meeting.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Youth ice event held on Sand Lake

The inaugural Pine County Collaborative Youth Ice Fishing Event was held on Sand Lake on Saturday, February 5. Pine County Probation Supervisor Kevin Glass stated, "The day started out with a brisk wind, snow, and in the single digits. But we live in Minnesota and that is to be expected."

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