

Amherst-Pelham Regional School Committee Meeting - August 23 2023

Public comment

Dear school committee,

I am writing with sadness and disappointment that this committee has not listened to the community's request for an emergency meeting up until this point.

Sadly, unlike the process laid out in the Amherst charter for a resident petition to call for a meeting of a body, there does not seem to be a similar mechanism for the regional committee. I hope this can be an area of policy change so residents with concerns about the regional schools have an avenue to bring them in front of the committee.

That aside, I want to express my concern about whether all our students can feel safe under the current District leadership of Dr. Morris. While the Title IX investigation is still pending, it seems there are concerns raised by students, parents and educators alike about Dr. Morris' knowledge of events prior to the April meeting in which he stated there had been no formal complaints. The concerns laid out by APEA in the vote of no confidence have not been addressed, and this will create an unstable work environment as we head back into the school year. Quite frankly I don't understand how a leader can be effective knowing those he leads have no faith in him. And I believe there will continue to be safety concerns for students who don't believe the administration has taken their pain seriously, and has neglected its legal obligation as mandated reporter.

I believe Dr. Morris should be placed on administrative leave, similarly to Ms. Cunningham, unless and until the investigation clears him from any wrongdoing.

Best,
Allegra Clark

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Dear School Committee Members,

With vacancies in key positions in the ARPS central office administration; with the need to replace positions in the Middle School; and with the implementation of numerous initiatives to address issues of transphobia and homophobia at ARMS; it does not make sense to search for a new Superintendent with the school year starting in two weeks.

I urge the School Committee to consider an Interim Superintendent who already has the trust of the school community. If Doug Slaughter is available, he would be an excellent choice as Interim, and would be a calm, effective leader to step in during this transition period and help restore stability to the District.

Thank you for your consideration,

Mary McCarthy

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I am saddened by the RSC's rebuff of my own and others' calls for face-to-face meetings during this crisis. That refusal has contributed to acrimony, sadness, and mistrust in our community. I think adopting a stance of curiosity and vulnerability in times of strife and conflict can be a bridge to healing, and such states are enabled by in-person interactions and undermined by remote communications. I nevertheless hope my own curiosity and vulnerability are apparent as I offer sincere questions.

First, a yes-or-no question on which every other thought and feeling I have about this crisis hinges: Do you believe the ARPS students, parents, teachers, and staff who say their repeated requests for help protecting trans and queer children at ARMS during the 2022/2023 school year were ignored or minimized by the district administration?

Peter Demling's statement after Superintendent Morris's resignation doesn't directly answer this question, but it voices his belief that there was "a rush to judge and condemn [Morris] without a complete set of facts."

Peter was clear he spoke only for himself, so I reframe my first question to maintain a focus on the affected children and their families and ask the rest of you:

Do you believe the parents and children who came forward are lacking "a complete set of facts" about their own experiences?

Do you think parents are lying about their attempts to get help from the district administration?

Do you think children's experiences self-harm, suicidal ideation, and hospitalization were fabricated? Or that they can be explained away as arising from...some other reason?

As of this writing, the Title IX investigation report isn't complete. How the RSC handles the delivery of the report is a new opportunity for repair. My questions follow:

1. Can you please publicly and thoroughly describe how the Title IX investigator was hired?
2. Is it true the investigation's cost will be close to \$50,000? If not, what is the projected cost?
3. Why did the district assume this cost instead of engaging in what I understand would've been a free, impartial process through the Department of Education? (And am I wrong in that understanding?)
4. Who will receive the Title IX report and be empowered to take action on its findings should past and current staff members be found responsible for violations of students' rights?
5. Specifically: will Dr. Morris be involved in receiving and reviewing the Title IX report? If so, what is the RSC's rationale for why this would be appropriate and effective?
6. Will the full Title IX report be made public, while redacting the names of children?
7. Why was Dr. Morris given a 6-figure severance package before the results of the investigation were delivered?

8. How does the package and the joint statement issued by Dr. Morris and the RSC claiming “no wrongdoing” on his part fail to amount to a “rush to judgement” in his favor “without a full set of facts?”

Three more questions:

1. What will the hiring process for the next superintendent be?
2. How will you ensure there is diverse representation on the hiring committee—including BIPOC, trans, and queer voices?
3. As the RSC reorganizes under new leadership and as we anticipate November elections, will you commit to transparency in your meetings and votes in an effort to rebuild trust with the community?

If you do believe the children and parents, I implore you to put that belief at the very center of everything you say and do to respond the fast-moving, terribly difficult circumstances now facing our school district. To paraphrase another part of Peter Demling’s statement from a different vantage point: You as an elected body would do well to realize the long-term negative impact of failing to center these children and families when deciding the future direction of our public schools.

Sincerely,

Megan St. Marie, Amherst resident and parent of 7 past and current ARPS students, dating back to 2004

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August 23, 2023

The past few months have been very challenging for the entire community. Moving forward and united, we urge the School Committees to protect students, to make decisions with integrity and transparency, and to hold leadership accountable.

With the exit of Dr. Morris, the community demands:

- an acting superintendent be appointed for the first few months of school.
- an immediate nationwide search for a qualified, experienced, superintendent.
- transparency in the timeline and all steps of the hiring process (a clear well documented screening of resumes, broad input for interview questions, community and staff open forums for finalists)
- a diverse interview committee that includes community, BIPOC family leaders, LGBTQIA+ family leaders, and APEA members.
- that no further staffing decisions be made by Dr. Morris prior to his exit.
- a review of the last few months hiring decisions, including the overstaffing of administrators and central office staff while cutting classroom teacher positions (resulting in increased class size in many classrooms).
- the release of the Title IX investigation summary to the public.

In Solidarity,

LGBTQIA+ Caucus

Latinx Caucus

Black Caucus
Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Caucus
Indigenous Caucus
Amherst Pelham Education Association

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Dear Sarahbess and other members of the Regional School Committee,

I am writing to request that you hold your upcoming meeting in person at the High School rather than on zoom.

For much of the summer, members of the regional communities have been asking for the committee to meet in person to discuss the return of the Superintendent, the Title IX investigation, and other related matters, and to give the public the opportunity to speak with you and be in the same physical space as you. By holding the meeting remotely, that opportunity is taken away and the humanity of the situation lessened.

Please reconsider the format of the meeting for Wednesday and hold it in person rather than virtually.

Many thanks,
Toni Cunningham
ARMS and Wildwood Parent