

1. From March 27, 2017

Heidi Spear to Christine Sullivan with all of board CC'd

Dear Christine,

I am writing to request three things.

First, I would like to confirm your general practice with regard to sharing communications from our community. Do you promptly confirm the sender's desire to engage the entire board, when that is unclear, and then share all communications from our community with the entire HUUSD Board? I for one want all communications shared. It was unfortunate that nobody but you had insight into Pete and Sally's communication and concerns in advance of our last meeting and I don't think we should be put in that situation again. Naturally, I recognize that last minute communications may not get distributed before a meeting but I would expect they would still reach us all.

Second, I request that we allocate some time at our next meeting to review Pete's communication and revisit our approach to PBL and the concerns raised. The concerns he raises and others are very widespread and I think they are extensive enough to have a tangible impact on enrollment. To be clear, concern does not seem rooted in PBL itself, which most seem to view as rational and intended to add rigor and increase accountability in PK-12 education. The central concerns, rather, seem to be that in our practice of PBL we are not making it our core business to challenge all students to increase their proficiency, whatever it may be, and that our grading system is both flawed and insufficiently differentiated. I believe these significant concerns warrant our immediate attention.

Third, to further inform our discussion, I request that the HUUSD Board receive all recent parent, staff and student survey results related to PBL and rollout of our PBL grading system.

Sincerely,

Heidi Spear  
m:508.344.4959

2. From March 27, 2017

Christine Sullivan reply to Heidi Spear with all of board CC'd

Hi Heidi,

Thanks for the feedback. I will attempt to answer your concerns briefly, in part, because I believe we'll be discussing some of these topics as a full board in upcoming meetings.

First, I did not forward my entire email chain with Peter to the full board. If I had, you would have seen that later Tuesday evening, I responded to his below email with an explanation of the constraints of the public comment section of our meetings and, in light of that, asked permission to forward his email on to the full group so that everyone would have a better sense of his concerns. I did not receive a response from him until late in the day Wednesday, which did not give me much lead time before our meeting, considering everything that usually goes on at that point in the day - especially when I need to get out of the house for the night. Frankly, I would never feel comfortable forwarding an email without first asking for permission or letting the sender know I would be doing so. I am sure you can appreciate why.

Second, follow up on PBL will be on the agenda for a future meeting. We will be finalizing the agenda for our 4/12 meeting later in the week. Given that we have a lot of other topics to discuss, some of which are unfinished business from our last agenda, I cannot tell you now that there be room for it. We will put it on an agenda as soon as possible.

Thirdly, I am going to respectfully disagree with you regarding the board's role on this issue. As I explained to Peter, my role as a board member is to insure that teachers and/or administration (as applicable) are listening to his concerns and responding to them as necessary. As Peter indicated, Sheila, Amy, Tom, and Lisa have given him multiple opportunities to explain his concerns, including meeting with him for two hours and allowing him access to Harwood's consultants. As they indicated they are working on improvements to the system that will address issues raised by him and others as well. This is feedback that they have gotten through multiple points of access - forums, surveys, conversations, etc. I expressed to Peter, that while it is hard to be patient while changes are being discussed and preparations are being made for them to be fully implemented, it is in the best interest of students that they be thoroughly thought out and carefully designed before being put in place. I don't think it would serve their interests to have to constantly adjust to multiple and ongoing changes. Furthermore, I believe the work being done around PBL this year has been done with respect to the expectations laid out in policy H-2: Parental Involvement.

I appreciate the concerns for how early flaws with the new system could impact enrollment, but our role here is simply to make sure the administration has what they need to accept and respond to the feedback with the end goal of systematic improvements, and that they are in fact working to make those improvements. In effect, we have been informed of the fact that these concerns are receiving the administration's immediate attention. I don't know that there really is anywhere else for us to properly go with it, other than to receive an update later this spring as to anticipated changes and improvements. Again, I think this piece on the role of the board will be sure to come up at future meetings.

Christine

3. From March 27, 2017

Jill Ellis to Christine Sullivan with all of board CC'd

Hello Christine,

Thank you for all of your time and effort.

I support your plan on having follow up on the PBL on a future meeting. I also appreciate that it is a hard task to keep our meeting agendas manageable and moving forward. However, I feel that time is of the essence on this topic and it would be wise to have it on our next agenda. Frankly, it would seem odd engaging on other topics while this issue has been set aside for future discussions.

Improving our enrollment is a top priority of the Board and I heard loud and clear in the room last Wednesday that parents are looking for alternatives for their children's high school education. I have also been approached by parents, from various towns in our district, all expressing their deep dissatisfaction with the reporting and the responses they have received to their feedback. I have a fondness and appreciation for value the of policies, I think that indicating to any of the parents in the room last Wednesday that we feel that the the Administration has complied and met expectations as stipulated in policy "H-2: Parental Involvement" would be met with justifiable disappointment and outrage.

Best regards,

Jill

4. From March 27, 2017

Christine Sullivan reply to Jill Ellis with all of board CC'd

I merely mentioned policy as something I refer to when I have a question as to how I should handle a situation in my role as a school board member. I'm pretty sure the word never came up in exchanges with Peter.

The administrative team would like to provide an update later this spring when they have more information.

The topic will be on our agenda planner by the end of this week. If we actually have time at our next meeting we can touch base on it under "Future Agenda/Calendar Planning".

Please, no more "reply all" emails.

Thanks,

Christine

5. From March 27, 2017

Gabe Gilman reply to Christine Sullivan with all of board CC'd

Hi all,

To keep on the right side of the OML, email discussion among a quorum or more is best limited to "scheduling a meeting, organizing an agenda, or distributing materials to discuss at a meeting." 1 V.S.A. § 310(2). For that reason, I'll try to avoid wandering into substantive debate in favor of stating my strong preference that the issue of *freshman assessment*--PBL itself is not very much in debate--be treated as urgent and placed on the next agenda.

Whether the Board *should* take some action is properly the subject of the meeting. That it *may* is not in question. "A school board may ... approve or disapprove rules and regulations proposed by the principal or superintendent for the conduct and management of public schools in the district." 16 V.S.A. § 563. In order to be in a position to act on assessment, if folks ultimately find that necessary, we'll want to have the issue clearly warned on the agenda for the next meeting.

Thanks,  
Gabe

6. From March 27, 2017

Gabe Gilman to Christine Sullivan

Agree with you w/r/t reply-all email--I snapped one off with a little OML scolding without realizing your wise advice on the subject had come in moments before.

But we have got to get this thing aired and cleaned up before any more damage is done. Instead of trying to manage the conversation, we need to get the administrators involved in managing the problem. Freshman parents are not happy. The new grading system is perceived as incoherent; explanations of what happened have done nothing to solve the problem, but have called into question whether anybody intends to try; and I'm finding that the parents we saw--who were remarkably thoughtful and careful in their criticism--are just the tip of the iceberg. I think we have to bite the bullet and deal with this.

7. From March 27, 2017

Christine Sullivan to Gabe Gilman

I don't want to come off the wrong way, so just a reminder that tone is sometimes hard with email. One thing to keep in mind is that this is all students 7-9 at Harwood and 5-8 at CB. One of these students is my child. Many times I've reminded myself that change is hard in education and I need to have confidence in the people shepherding this change. I think we can sympathize.

They know there's a problem and pretty much what it is. I've answered the surveys and been to a forum. I can tell you, based on the latter, what people don't want to hear anymore is, "we're working on it." It looks like they will be able to share some sort of concrete plan in May. I think it would be best to have this new information that shows forward progress the next time we give it a lot of attention. Not that I want it to seem like there isn't an issue to be addressed, but there are also other issues to be addressed.

We will work on scheduling it this week. I can touch base with you once I have more information. There are some topics we really need to cover before we get to the local council piece on the 26th. I will also work on a short term plan so that people understand that it is their intention to improve the situation.

In short, I'm working on it.

8. From March 28, 2017  
Heidi Spear to Christine Sullivan

I think the conversation has to happen at the board level but I will just follow up to remark that I feel delaying on this would be a huge mistake contrary to the interests of our students and taxpayers.

It is not an exaggeration to say that many families are losing faith in our school and taking immediate action to explore alternatives. We lost quite a few students when we eliminated honors programming and we stand to lose a great deal more now. When so many families have expressed both serious concern and a sense of urgency about resolving critical issues impacting their children's education and prospects, deferring this topic in favor of less impactful or urgent topics reinforces an impression that the district is unaccountable to the community. Response by the board in the form of communication with our community and direction to the administration must come swiftly to arrest defections and address the underlying problems driving them.

While the administration would prefer to defer, they should not determine the board's timeline. We do not work for the administration, of course, but for the community, providing governance of the district. There seems to be some substantive confusion on this matter.

Heidi

9. From March 28, 2017  
Christine Sullivan reply to Heidi Spear

I absolutely agree the board should be concerned that this might impact enrollment and I don't want to minimize that issue at all. However, I feel we need to take a calm, measured approach. We don't want more of what has been going on - parents coming into whatever forum to complain they don't like the system and administrators

responding by saying they are working on it. It would just lead to more frustrations on both sides, only now some of it would be directed at the board. Our job is to make sure that people have their frustrations heard and responded to, and to make sure that the administration has what it needs in order to do that. That is being done. If we want to make that point in a public meeting, it might serve a purpose. However, it is not our job to synthesize feedback and make systematic changes that none of us are qualified to make. Parents want to know that tangible changes are on the horizon and that a plan is in sight for changes to be made before the start of next year. Our job is to make sure that is the case and that the timeline can be met.

I believe an update on PBL reporting will be coming out before our next meeting. I will make sure it goes to the board. The administration will be ready to present on next steps in May. No one has been deferring responsibility, they have been working on the issue as is evidenced by both these things. But, change is not immediate. In the meantime, there's not much value in rehashing old information. It will be a lot more valuable to message on concrete plans and positive and tangible changes. Showing progress towards an actual plan should ease some of the anxiety.