



DENVER LANGUAGE SCHOOL

MEETING OF THE DENVER LANGUAGE SCHOOL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, February 26, 2019

Location: DLS Gilpin Campus

Time: 6:00 PM – 8:30 PM

Conference Call (303) 557-5869 Pin 1234

Mission Statement – Achieve academic excellence and intercultural competence through language immersion education

In Attendance:

Board Members

Lisa Peloso, Susan Hennessy, Carter Davidson, Corelle Spettigue, Josh Lin, Dave St. John-Larkin, Rebecca Rogers, Parker Schenken, Faye Caronan

Absent Board Member

Matt Wagner, Shawna Mounsey

Non-Board Members

Kathy Benzel, Lori Deacon, Doug Seligman, Robert Newman, Camilla Modisett, Rachel Posedenti, Sarah Hines, Ann Konieczcy, Babette Hudson-Tsao, Rita Lee, Kit Barwick, Barb Poole, Melissa Steele, Yuanting Zhang, Michelle Rotter, Laura Young, Teresa Helbach, Renee Hayes, Bryan Snow

Meeting Called to Order: 6:09 pm

Public Comment

Rita Lee - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen

Our mission at DLS is for our students “To achieve academic excellence and intercultural competence through language immersion education.” Our mission is now in jeopardy.

In order to support our students to achieve excellence, we need an effective **team, or community**, that includes all of us—administrators, teachers, students,

parents, and staff. Effective teams need trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people. Whether intended or not, the abrupt firing of Bingqing Chen directly and negatively impacted our sense of community.

1. Trust—To function effectively, our teachers need to trust that we have their backs. This means listening openly to their needs and concerns and providing the necessary support they need to do their jobs. Firing a teacher mid-year, without any apparent due process or recourse, and without transparency destroys trust. Instead of creating a culture of excellence, these actions are creating a culture of fear and frustration. I now worry that if my child's teacher speaks up about an issue, that they won't be heard or that they will be fired without notice. When we cannot engage in honest, open, and productive dialogue, our students are not going to get everything the teachers feel they need to succeed. We have to be able to see things as they really are and address them or problems will be left to fester and grow.

2. Respect for each other's competence—I respect that our teachers are the experts in language immersion. In order for our teachers to teach to their highest level of competence, we need to provide them with the resources they need—not just classroom supplies, but other resources such as a fair, living wage, equitable treatment, ongoing training and coaching, and behavioral specialists for our struggling students. Our ability to recruit and retain highly skilled teachers depends on this.

3. Caring about each other as people—To me, firing someone mid-year without warning does not demonstrate caring about each other as human beings. I worry about the impact this has on Bing and her family—both the personal and emotional impact, but also the financial impact. I also worry about all the students in her class who cared very much about her, who have no chance to say goodbye, no opportunity to begin to understand what has happened and why their beloved teacher is suddenly gone.

Every other system I know, including DPS, requires a written improvement plan to allow people the opportunity to grow. Even in the case of something egregious, DPS protocol is to place someone on administrative leave pending investigation. There are also opportunities to appeal. As far as I know, this was not the process that happened here. If we want to truly create a community that supports each other, that fosters our growth and development, then we need to have more transparency and a clear process we all understand.

I believe in language immersion and the DLS model, which is why I have my 2 kids enrolled in this program. I also believe that we can do better. I believe we need to take a deep hard look at the impact of our actions on our school culture,

on our teachers, and on our students and ask ourselves "What kind of community do we want DLS to be?"

Kit Barwick - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen

I am a parent of two students in the Mandarin program at DLS. I have seen the powerful impact good teachers can have on our students. I feel we have done a disservice to our students by firing Bingqing Chen. Bing is a model teacher, admired by parents and respected throughout the school.

Firing Bing did not need to happen. This action was taken by admin "after deliberating for some time" which means leadership had time to engage, provide resources and support Bing. Admin deliberated on this for some time which means that supportive interventions were not implemented, but they chose not to. I believe making this change mid-year was not in the best interest of the students who love her.

I am told that DLS follows DPS policies for disciplining students, however, DLS does not follow DPS policies for disciplining teachers. If DLS has a policy for teachers, it is not publicly posted.

Leadership matters: According to research (citations provided) school leaders are second-only-to-teachers on the positive impact of student learning. Good leadership can have a multiplier effect on the quality of teaching. This is achieved by developing people - not firing. Further research (citations provided) finds that effective leadership from all sources - principals, influential teachers, staff and others - is associated with better student performance. Good leadership improves teacher motivation and work settings, which fortify classroom instruction. This needs to happen at DLS.

Support matters: Research shows (citations provided) that supporting and equipping teachers improves student achievement retains more teachers and strengthens school climate. The most effective principals respect every member of the school community and provide "an upbeat, solution-oriented, no-blame environment".

As we move forward, we need to restore faith in the process of empowering teachers and supporting students. I respectfully request that the board will consider the following changes to improve DLS's education program:

1. Reinstate Bing immediately
2. Conduct investigation into the process for her dismissal
3. Either follow DPS policies/procedures for disciplining teachers or develop a written and approved process including:
 - A. Formal counseling
 - B. Process improvement plan
 - C. Details of why the teacher was dismissed
 - D. Process for teachers to file a grievance
 - E. Publicly posting this policy and process online
4. Provide immediate, unlimited support to teachers individually to improve the quality of the classrooms
5. Develop a better process to handle disruptive teachers

6. Provide an ongoing climate survey for teachers not accessible by staff. Currently, the survey is conducted with GoogleDocs, accessible by staff with the ability to see which teacher edited and updated the survey.

I am available to assist the board to evaluate what makes the most sense as a first step.

Michelle Rotter - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen

I have two kids at DLS. Here are the details of Bing's case:

- She taught at DLS for the past four years
- This was an abrupt firing/she received no notice
- She was an effective teacher for our students
- There was no opportunity for her or her students to say goodbye
- She had no problematic reviews until this year
- She had been receiving support for improved student performance with IStation.
- Bing was known to be a vocal in Mandarin program. She advocated for other teachers when it was difficult for others.

Ann Koneizcny - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen

I am aware that the board cannot address personnel issues, but it is important that the board is aware of what happened.

1. Bing Chen was notified by the administration on Friday, Feb. 22 that she was being dismissed from the school effective immediately. This was a shock to her as she received no prior notification of this possibility.

-She has been nothing short of a devoted and effective teacher for our students and the way she was dismissed, leaving no opportunity for her or her students to say goodbye, is upsetting.

-She has had no prior admonition or indications of unsatisfactory job performance in her career at DLS prior to this year. In previous years, she reports always receiving favorable reviews from the administration.

-She was recently receiving coaching by the curriculum director to meet iStation performance goals but she understood other teachers were being given similar support.

-there was no communication that the coaching was tied to her job security.

-It was mentioned that she had been taking time off this year more than usual. However, each instance was approved by administration and involved her application for US citizenship and illness with her child. The day of termination was the first time administration mentioned that her absence was a problem.

-Her daughter was also a Kindergarten student in the Mandarin program. As a consequence of her abrupt firing, she made a decision to pull her daughter from the school.

-Finally, she was known to be a vocal advocate for teachers especially in the Mandarin program who are more reticent to voice concerns with leadership. This termination without any apparent justifiable cause appears to silence a teacher who was trying to communicate with DLS' administration, and may suppress such communications going forward.

-Bing was never warned previously that her performance would result in dismissal. Very difficult to discuss/process with 9yo. Understands "at will" firing. 6 - week improvement plan. Presented to the teacher then if not met can be fired. Is there any due process for a teacher who is going to be fired at DLS. Teachers cannot unionize, cannot speak for themselves. What kind of community do we want to show everyone. How do we support each other? Concerns that teachers are not getting the support that they need.

2. Prior to the meeting on Feb. 22, we understand that Ms. Chen had never been warned previously about concerns regarding her performance that would result in dismissal. The manner in which she was dismissed immediately with no opportunity to say goodbye to the kids is upsetting.

At DPS, there is a process when a teacher is in consideration of losing their job.

- Where immediate firings are not warranted (e.g., child safety), a six-week improvement plan with specific goals and roadmap to improvement is presented to the teacher. The teacher is given a chance to learn and remedy the situation.

- If something is so egregious that the teacher needs to be removed ASAP, the teacher is placed on administrative leave while things are investigated further.

Is there anything in place for due process, if teachers can be fired at will?

"what kind of community do we want DLS to be?" One that takes advantage of power dynamics, or one that nurtures.

DLS is different from other schools. Yes, like most schools most of our teachers are women, but unlike most schools, our teachers are also immigrant women. I assume many of them rely on their employment for visa purposes. Because of these additional factors, DLS should be especially sensitive in the way it manages its teachers.

3. This leads to concerns as well that perhaps teachers are not being given the support they need. The administrative structure was changed this school year. How is this new arrangement working to support teachers? Was any teacher input taken into account when choosing their direct managers? What are the standards and process for managing teacher performance, and how are those applied in the context of the new leadership structure that was implemented this year? Are leaders at every level trained in managing performance and coaching teachers to improve performance?

4. Additionally, a broader issue is the lack of a safe forum for any DLS teacher to openly express concerns over administrative decisions or other issues at the school.

- How can the Board ensure that teachers have an independent and credible process through which they can pursue a concern/grievance and have it investigated by a neutral party? The availability of an independent review can greatly improve teacher satisfaction and trust. Do DLS employees have the confidential counseling service like the C-SEAP for the state employees?<https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/c-seap/confidential-counseling>

- We believe that there is still a culture of fear among teachers at DLS. Our school will not thrive without open and honest conversations and the opportunity for responsiveness to the needs of the students and teachers. There is a Chinese saying says “you can’t cover the fire with paper”. Communications should be clear and transparent. First, you must alleviate parents fears about this situation (i.e., whether the situation was related to student safety). Being vague only adds to speculation and rumors. Second, communications should not be fear-based. DidDLS actually try to stop people from discussing this? Could this be handled differently?

- What are the Board and administration doing to build a speak-up culture at DLS? Extensive research on psychological safety in the workplace shows that the more that employees feel safe taking risks and speaking up about ideas, concerns, questions or mistakes, the more effective an organization or team can become. According to research done at Google with their own employees, psychologically safe teams get better results, and its individuals are rated as effective twice as often by their executives. Moreover, individuals are more likely to stay with the company for a longer time and bring in more revenue.

- Let’s start by giving teachers a survey that is completely anonymous. Surveys are done on paper and pencil or GoogleDocs does not allow for true anonymity. Allow teachers a document that they can fill out via computer and then print a hard copy to be given to Admin.

5. Teacher compensation. With the recent DPS strike, the disparity between our teachers and DPS grows ever wider. Our teachers do not have the ability to unionize, who will speak for them if they cannot? Does someone at DLS have the role of an ombudsman? If not, could the Board play this role, particularly for appeals of termination/dismissal matters?

6. Support for teachers and students also means promoting a good learning environment for our children. It was understood that this 3rd-grade class has been having major behavioral problems in the classroom that eight months into the school year are still a major disruption. How is DLS evaluating restorative justice measures? Are the many resources from deans, counselors, and other psychosocial supports working for the teacher and the students? What is DLS doing to evaluate the Deans and others charged with administering and correcting behavior problems within the classroom?

Teresa Helbach - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen

I have two kids at DLS. Bing’s firing was a shock to our class. What are the standards and process of managing teacher performance? What coaching exists around teacher performance? The school lacks a safe forum for teachers to express concerns.

Is there an independent and credible process for bringing concerns about leadership? Is confidential counseling service available to our teachers? What about student safety?

The lack of necessary communications adds to speculation and rumors. What are the board and admin doing to create a “speak up” culture at DLS?

Babette Hudson-Tsao - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen
Shared concerns about adequate and fair teacher compensation. What is DLS going to do to address this?

Laura Young - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen.

I am a room parent at DLS and I received a lot of calls about what happened but had no information to share. There have been student behavior problems and our class was on the listing of “problematic classrooms”. The problem is not going away. People talk about the “Naughtiness Bug” going around. DLS needs to deal with these problems before they get out of hand. The school needs to find a behavioral specialist to work in classrooms and consult to make classrooms safe. There also needs to be a discussion about how we can improve. The current climate is very unhealthy. Teachers already have high-stress jobs and student behavioral issues make for an even more challenging workplace. Additionally, teachers now face insecurity and fear for their jobs. How is admin handling student behavioral issues and supporting its teachers?

Edward Southwick - Comment regarding the firing of Bingqing Chen. (read by Kit Barwith.

The same as many, I was shocked to hear that Bing is no longer our 3rd grade teacher. She has been a wonderful teacher. My son has always spoke highly of her and has been both challenged and given the individual attention needed in her class. Most importantly she has shown herself to be a caring and dedicated teacher who is committed to the education of all of her students.

I am at a loss on how to address this situation as there has been no communication to parents other than informing us that Bing is no longer our teacher. Parent input in this process has never apparently been deemed necessary by the decision makers in this process. Also, I do not know what process has even been involved in this decision. Since Bing has been a great teacher, this seems to be political in nature. Once again, since there has been no communication about this process, what else can parents believe? I am really having difficulties with how a mid-year decision like this will affect our children’s education with this major of a disruption. Has this been considered?

I understand that personnel decisions are confidential. However, given how this decision has such a major impact on my child’s education, there needs to much more information shared with parents about this extremely disappointing situation.

Lastly, if it is determined that this decision was made hastily or ill-advised, what process would there be for bringing Bing back to DLS? I am concerned about how this decision will affect the rest of the staff and our ability to recruit superior teachers.

I will not be able to attend the Board Meeting tomorrow night and would like to have this letter read into the minutes of the meeting.

I look forward to receiving much more information about this situation.

Sincerely,

Edward Southwick

Approval of Minutes

Corelle moves to approve minutes from 01/15/19.

Josh seconds. All in favor. Motion carries.

Approval of SY Calendar 2019-20

Lisa moves to approve SY Calendar 2019-20 - Corelle seconds. Discussion about extra professional dates. All in favor. Motion carries. Calendar approved.

PTO - Sarah Hines

Screened Angst for parents on 2/19. Modestly attended. There was a technology glitch during the student screening, so students still need to complete viewing.

A red envelope with \$50 was given to all staff for the Chinese New Year. Another staff gift is scheduled for Fiesta Hispanica.

PTO is providing breakfast at the upcoming parent-teacher conferences. DLS is providing lunch.

Art/Music Showcase - 5/24. There will be two food trucks - Roll it up Sushi and Downtown Fingers (chicken). The PTO is expecting approximately 1500 people between 4-7 at the Whiteman campus.

The PTO is working on its internal structure following the transition from PTA. They have eliminated the fundraising post and have expanded the volunteer coordinator role(s).

Currently addressing how to galvanize parent involvement and boost community building.

Stakeholder meeting to plan for events for the SY 2019-20.

Committee Updates

Financial - Lori Deacon and Rebecca

Revenue front is trending solidly. Fun club participation and revenue is higher than expected as the program continues to strengthen. Contributions and donations are also trending strong. \$238K on record from January.

From the Mill levy front, all school districts do their final reconciliations and final student count projections in January. The district moved to monthly payments. DPS payments are close to 50%. They have determined the remaining funds and have broken them out for the remainder of the year.

3K accounts - Capital accounts - coming out ahead.

State grants - ELL, GT, read act grants all getting spent down to get refunds.

PPR tracking as expected based on mid-year reconciliation.

Salaries and benefits trending as expected with the exception of an increase on worker's comp policy resulting from the mid-year audit. The remainder of the insurance paid for the year. Acct 0580 - will see a lot more activities right in spring in regards to district services such as transport, social services, health, etc. DLS has spent all tech bond money, \$180K. Field trip activities are expected to spend down towards the end of the year. Total expense tracking as expected at 58%. No surprises aside from worker's comp audit.

Looking forward at numbers for teacher retention packages.

Transportation numbers - billed 3 times a year. Billing us on a flat rate per day.

Lori/Kathy to send bills to Miriam and Dave to verify past billing cycles.

Hoping to have a draft budget to present in March.

DLS was one of the only schools that increased enrollment if DPS forecast.

Governance/Board Recruitment - Carter

Board recruitment has focused on screening treasurer candidates. Ideally, shooting to have the new board member start in March. Might need to schedule a board phone call to facilitate the nomination process in order to stay on time table.

Facilities - Parker

Whiteman and Gilpin gardens -

The Whiteman garden initial quote of 21K was reduced to 16,565K. Kathy and Lori found funds in the school budget to fund total cost.

Gilpin grant funds covering \$6500 of 10K, DLS to cover remaining \$3,500 balance.

Both gardens to open for this growing season.

Executive Director Report - Kathy

Human Resources Strategic Plan - Spring 2019

Rachel/PHR is an amazing addition to DLS. Meets with DLS staff regularly. Makes herself available. Really great at onboarding staff.

As DLS continues to grow, the HR Department has focused on reorganizing policies and procedures. They revamped the staff handbook in time for the start of the school year.

Strategic Plan:

-Teacher shortage across the country. CO is sorely underfunded/bottom 5 in the nation for education funding. Some schools too small to compete with the rest of the district.

-Who is the HR dept.? Kathy, Rachel, Doug, and Robert. This is a regular structure of an HR Department for a single-school charter.

-Priorities:

Safety

Employer of choice

Maintain low staff turnover (compared to district and state)

Best ways to support staff

Student achievement

Attracting best teachers

Support teachers to deliver the best education

Total compensation package template - brand new to DLS

Areas where we are continuing to improve/grow as a staff

Growth and Change in Structure

Total Compensation Plan

Frontline -

-tracks all employee work activity. Helps HR determine approval for PTO.

-PD time and Evaluations - all instructional staff are logged into Frontline which tracks professional development units

Evaluation Process -

-Teacher performance framework

-Evaluation Cycle

-Mid-year and End-of-year conversations

-Teacher pathways

DLS plans to hand out employment agreements to teachers as soon as possible, pending board approval of the new teacher salary proposal. Carter to facilitate a Doodle poll of an additional meeting between now and the standing March meeting to review and adopt HR plan.

Board to vote on a budget in May

A place holder in May for Development presentation.

Equity Committee

-Meeting to be determined.

-Completed a joint grant proposal with Highline Academy and GALS for community services

Lisa moves to adjourn the meeting. Carter seconds. All in favor.

Meeting Adjourned: 8:59 pm