

From: Ward Hamilton
Subject: Melrose City Council - Special Meeting - October 11, 2022
Date: October 3, 2022 at 5:06 PM
To: citycouncil@cityofmelrose.org



Melrose City Council:

During the September 27, 2022, Melrose School Committee meeting, Superintendent Julie Kukenberger provided a budget update. According to Kukenberger, she had been aware of a budget deficit in excess of \$2.2m since July 12, 2022. She provided a visual illustration and other information that was not included in the agenda packet. Some school committee members were clearly surprised by the revelation. The Mayor, however, already had a plan that would reduce the figure to \$775,000 and Kukenberger indicated that they were working with a financial consultant.

Mayor Brodeur stated that the district will need to ensure transparency and an understanding of the impacts of this sudden shortfall saying, "The transparency and the candor is going to be what gives us the credibility that we're going to need." School committee vice chair Jen Razi-Thomas said, "It's going to take us a while to figure out the solution. And it's going to take a while to rebuild trust with our community, with ourselves and with the process." School committee member Ed O'Connell said, "The big question for me as a member of this School Committee is 'How could we not have known this?'"

Rebuilding trust in the community will require transparency in answering that question in the weeks ahead. When Kukenberger became aware of the budget deficit on July 12th, she was in the process of her annual evaluation by the school committee. On July 22nd, school committee chair Jen McAndrew issued a memorandum to the school committee advising that Kukenberger was successful in her evaluation. Further, McAndrew proposed that the school committee approve a raise for Kukenberger at their July 26th meeting. The final report of the superintendent's evaluation and the raise were approved by the school committee on July 26th.

On September 27th, Kukenberger stated that the budget is her responsibility and that she takes full ownership of "the current fiscal reality." However, part of that responsibility requires that she keep the school committee abreast of any budget-related issues such as the deficit that she identified more than two months earlier. Did she keep the information secret so that she would receive a positive evaluation and raise? Did anyone on the school committee, including the Mayor, know about this before Tuesday night? If so, who knew and when did they find out?

There is an integrity issue here, and it starts with the superintendent. Being transparent and rebuilding trust will require a firm understanding of who knew what and when. If Kukenberger kept the budget deficit a secret until after her evaluation was completed then her integrity has been compromised and she is unfit to serve further. If anyone on the school committee knew about the issue before her evaluation was completed and accepted on July 26th, and did not publicly share the information with the rest of the committee, then their integrity has been compromised and they should resign from their office.

While some Melrose School Committee members expressed surprise and made statements at the meeting on the 27th, Superintendent Kukenberger was not asked a single question by anyone on the school committee. This is unfathomable and nothing less than a dereliction of duty that smacks of impropriety. The school committee failed to address the issue in a meaningful way and has violated the public's trust. It now falls upon the City Council to restore that trust. I implore you to ask Superintendent Kukenberger:

- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Jen McAndrew that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Paul Brodeur that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Ed O'Connell that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;

July 12, 2022,

- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Jen Razi-Thomas that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Margaret Driscoll that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Lizbeth DeSelm that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Dorey Withey that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- On or about what date did you bring it to the attention of Patrick Dello Russo that you became aware of a budget deficit on July 12, 2022;
- When you became aware of the budget deficit on July 12, 2022, you were in the process of being evaluated. Did this influence your decision to keep the issue a secret?;
- On July 26, 2022, the school committee voted to accept and approve your fully satisfactory evaluation and to award you a pay raise. At any point, did you feel compelled to make them aware of the budget situation? If so, what did you do? If not, why?;
- Was anyone on the school committee aware of the budget issues while your evaluation was underway? If so, who? When did they become aware? How did they become aware?;
- On March 3, 2020, when you were interviewed by the superintendent screening committee, you were asked:

"By a 55 to 45 margin, Melrose voters approved a \$5.18 million override to stabilize school funding in April of 2019. The City is looking for a strong fiscal leader who will be able to maintain (if not grow) our programs yet maintain equitable and inclusive offerings to meet our diverse students' interests and needs within our budget constraints. How do you evaluate and monitor a budget? How do you decide where cuts or shifts need to be made? Will you take ownership of fiduciary responsibility where budget is concerned?"

You answered in the affirmative, that you would take full ownership of the budget. How would you answer the same questions now?;

- What are you going to do restore the confidence of the public in your ability to operate within budgetary limits? Is it even possible to do so? Are any of the errors or issues that caused the deficit in FY2022 present in the FY 2023 budget? How are you going to balance this deficit against the impending crisis with the teachers union? Is there any money to give them a raise?; and,
- In retrospect, how could you have handled this situation better?

I have filed a FOIA request with the City of Melrose to uncover documentary evidence of the communications which transpired during the six months preceding the September 27, 2022, revelation that there was a \$2.2m school budget deficit. I will forward the information to you upon receipt. The public trust has been compromised--it now falls on you to make things right.

Thank you.

Ward Hamilton