

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 down 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.

If the Melrose School Committee wants to earn back the public's trust then only complete transparency will make that a possibility. Anything less will only worsen the situation.