

## SPRING LAKE BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL MEETING, February 10, 2022

The Spring Lake Board of Education held a Special Meeting on Thursday, February 10, 2022, in person at the Spring Lake High School Auditorium. Jennifer Nicles called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. Board members present: Jennifer Nicles, Curt Theune, Kathy Breen, Bruce Callen, Katie Pigott, Paul Aldridge and Christopher (Chris) Beck. Absent: None

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

### **PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Joseph Delfgaw, 17097 Birchview Dr., Nunica – commented he and his wife felt it was important for the Board to hear some things from the parents' side. He provided how much Mike Gilchrist's support meant to him and his family while his stepson was going through a transition during high school. He expressed appreciation for how Mr. Gilchrist made sure his stepson felt safe and accepted and indicated Mr. Gilchrist could not have handled the situation better.

Traci Raha, 10991 Wren Dr., Nunica – expressed her gratitude for Mr. Gilchrist's leadership during her children's time at SLPS and his efforts to try to reach out and touch every single kid. She stated she found it shocking about the way that the information was delivered because it allowed people time to speculate and create rumors which she found defeating without more facts. She stated Mr. Gilchrist has taken the time to personally advocate for her son and pointed him on an excellent path with the Tech Center. Further, she stated her daughter and former students, who are part of the Kzoo crew, were shocked about this information. She shared their gratitude and gratefulness for Mr. Gilchrist and relayed 3 stories from former students who wanted to thank Mr. Gilchrist for his assistance during difficult family times. Ms. Raha concluded that, as a parent, these are important moments that have truly taught these kids empathy, kindness and compassion, and we are all better because he has been here for the last 21 years.

Mike Clover, 17865 Oakwood Dr., SL – stated that while he clearly knows nothing about the details of the investigation, he wanted to share his belief that Mike Gilchrist always had the students' best interests in mind. He provided two things he knows for sure: 1) if you look back over the course of someone's career and you have the advantage of hindsight, you could question decisions made, and that is probably the same for Mr. Gilchrist, and 2) Mr. Gilchrist always had the students' best interests in mind.

Nina McKeough-Reed, 17510 N Fruitport Rd., SL – Stated she saw the news piece that Mr. Furton is driving the bus and stated it was fantastic and thanked him. Further, she stated she was here to speak on behalf of Mike Gilchrist and believes he has never forgotten why he chose education as a profession and a passion. In her opinion, he has always conducted himself with fairness, integrity, kindness and compassion. She believes he takes his responsibility as an honor and privilege with the utmost professionalism. Further, Mr. Gilchrist looks at students as people, not just students, individuals all unique in their own right. She believes Mr. Gilchrist takes his job as a custodian of our children as serious as he takes being a parent himself and he does it with grace and honor. She provided how upset her daughter was at hearing of Mr. Gilchrist's suspension and that she held him in the highest regard and thought he was an excellent principal. She stated Mr. Gilchrist cares and understands situations and events in student's lives, about their mental and physical wellbeing and their success as humans. She stated Mr. Gilchrist is about right and wrong not win or lose. She stated he didn't get into this business of education to end here, which feels like a witch hunt. She questioned if Mr. Gilchrist did something

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wrong to make it right for a student to continue forward momentum in a time of acute crisis, is that really wrong? She concluded by saying that Mr. Gilchrist was one of a handful of staff that showed compassion and care, not only for her family, but the student body and community during a time of unprecedented tragedy. She implored the Board to be very meticulous in their investigation, to look at the man who has helped shape lives of thousands of men and women in this community and tread lightly on the outcome.

**CLOSED SESSION – PERSONNEL MATTER AT THE REQUEST OF EMPLOYEE**

Curt Theune moved, supported by Kathy Breen, to go into closed session.

Jennifer Nicles provided that the Board will go into closed session to hear complaints brought against the District's high school principal, Michael Gilchrist, concerning academic records because Mr. Gilchrist has requested a closed hearing under Section 8(1)(a) of the Open Meetings Act; and, to consider material exempt from discussion or disclosure by the state or federal statutes, including student records protected by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act also referred to as FERPA.

Roll Call Vote: Yes – Nicles, Breen, Theune, Callen, Pigott, Aldridge, Beck  
No – None

Motion approved. Jennifer Nicles provided that the Board will go into closed session and will return to the auditorium when finished.

The Board went into closed session at 7:14 p.m.

Curt Theune moved, supported by Chris Beck, to return to open session at 8:05 p.m.

Vote: Yes – Unanimous

Jennifer Nicles provided that the Board has reviewed the investigation report related to this matter. The report will be made available to the public at a later date. This will occur as soon as it can be assured that student privacy rights are appropriately protected.

**ACTION ITEMS**

**CONSIDER RESOLUTION ACCEPTING RESIGNATION OF MICHAEL GILCHRIST**

Jennifer Nicles stated the Resolution accepting Mr. Gilchrist resignation will be considered and read the resolution out loud.

Curt Theune moved, supported by Bruce Callen, to consider the Resolution accepting the resignation of high school principal Michael Gilchrist as presented. Discussion followed.

Mr. Furton stated while he has worked with Mr. Gilchrist over the last 14 years, he has a number of positive comments and stories regarding Mr. Gilchrist that he could easily share in memory of the time he was principal at the high school. There is no shortage of accolades. However, the report shared with the Board details some facts associated with student records and mismanagement of those records. Mr.

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Furton provided that he will review the report tonight at a high level and that the report will be released in its entirety after private student information is protected.

Mr. Furton provided the investigation began with this broad question: Did Mike Gilchrist change student grades in a manner consistent with district policies and educational ethics? It was important to establish unbiased facts in support of an answer to that question, and Mr. Furton provided the following timeline of the investigation:

- January 13, 2022: Report of 14 grade changes made by one unidentified individual
- January 14, 2022: Identified user as Mike Gilchrist who made the grade changes; Obtained list of additional grade changes made by Mr. Gilchrist
- January 17, 2022: Mr. Furton and Mr. Ely interview with HS Registrar and Media Specialist
- January 24, 2022: Mr. Furton and Mr. Ely interview Mr. Gilchrist regarding allegations; Mr. Gilchrist placed on paid administrative leave pending the investigation of changes to student academic records
- January 25, 2022: Mr. Furton and Mr. Ely meet with Mr. Gilchrist, at his request, to see if he could provide answer.
- January 26, 2022: Mr. Gilchrist submitted his resignation to Mr. Furton
- January 27, 2022: Investigation began with interviews of high school staff with Mr. Ely, or another administrator within the district, and Mr. Furton, and looking at 51 student records belonging to 31 different students.

Some of the areas that were impacted by this review include Mr. Gilchrist's contract, three district polices – conflict of interest, grading policy and anti-fraud policy – and his administrator's certificate and educator code of ethics. Each one of those could be impacted by the findings of the investigation.

During the specifics of the investigation, Mr. Furton came to understand that grade changes typically at the high school were only made by the Registrar so there should not be instances when grades were changed by any other individual. He received anecdotal reports of conversations between Mr. Gilchrist and certain staff members which paint a picture of an individual who was trying to spin a narrative different than what was available on paper – in other words, finding ways to rationalize the behavior at hand.

In the interview with Mr. Gilchrist, he had difficulty answering questions, stated he had not changed grades and admitted that the process of changing grades did not include a good paper trail, that it was very loose. As questions became more specific regarding grade reports and specific changes, inconsistencies were found with what Mr. Gilchrist shared with Mr. Furton and Mr. Ely and what he had previously stated to other staff. It was clear by the end of the meeting that there were some less than truthful comments and statements made relative to this issue. It became evident that Mr. Gilchrist's statements were not an accurate depiction of what occurred over the course of 8 years with the grade changes that Mr. Gilchrist had made.

In the second interview on January 26, Mr. Gilchrist apologized for the comments he had made and admitted that he had done all of the things in question and said that he needed to know what to do to make it right. He offered two options. If it was going to be a disciplinary situation, he was going to admit to his staff everything that had been done. If, however, it was going to result in his employment being terminated, he would resign immediately. At that point, Mr. Furton notified Mr. Gilchrist that the

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situation needed to be investigated fully, and that until it was investigated, the district would not accept a resignation from him and was not going to offer any discipline as the facts needed to be discovered.

Mr. Furton described the teacher interview process and provided that 14 of the 17 teachers said that they would go to the Registrar, in person or via email, to make any grade changes. All but 3 also stated that grade changes were not discussed with Mr. Gilchrist. After a review of the records with the teachers, the vast majority of the 51 grade changes were made without teacher knowledge or consent. Overrides had occurred. Some of those grade changes were for reasons that were heartfelt and sentimental – students may have been in crisis or experiencing some sort of distress. However, they were still violations of policy. The report shows that the majority of grade changes did not fit that description, the majority have some other explanation which have yet to be known or understood. Students who were by all accounts not in distress or experiencing any particular difficulty seemed to get a hand when a hand was not needed.

After interviews with teachers, additional communication from Mr. Gilchrist stated that many of the families he worked with had delicate situations. He went on to apologize again for putting Mr. Furton, the Board, staff, students and the community through this situation.

Mr. Furton provided his findings that Mike Gilchrist is in violation of his employment contract, District policy and the educational code of ethics provided under his administrator certificate. The terms, policies and ethics all serve to support the core, fundamental mission of the District, which is to provide equal educational opportunity to all students. Left unchecked, the conduct at issue here undermines public trust and makes the concepts of merit and basic fairness secondary to access and influence.

In conclusion, Mike Gilchrist's conduct related to these matters constitutes grounds for terminating his employment with the District and voiding his contract. However, Mr. Gilchrist has tendered a resignation which he is inclined to recommend the Board accept. While Mr. Gilchrist's motivation and methods related to the matters at hand may warrant censure, what is most important is that the District and Mr. Gilchrist part ways, not how that is accomplished. A resolution to this effect has been prepared for the Board's consideration.

Jennifer Nicles asked Mr. Furton to explain the steps to prevent this from happening in the future.

Mr. Furton provided the following steps will be put in place immediately:

- 1) Limit access to the ability to change grades in PowerSchool to only two individuals in the district, the head technology coordinator and the HS Registrar.
- 2) A form has been developed for grade changes requiring teacher and principal signatures before submission to the Registrar for any grade change.
- 3) Yearly audit of grade changes.

Chris Beck asked about regaining trust of the teachers that the grades they provide end up in the system. Mr. Furton provided that it will take some time to repair the trust and noted that the teachers relationships with students are sacred, and the district cannot have individuals with the authority or the ability to override that. Mr. Furton believes that the new procedures will help with that.

Roll Call Vote: Yes – Nicles, Breen, Theune, Callen, Pigott, Aldridge, Beck  
No – None

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Resolution approved.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Curt Theune moved, supported by Chris Beck, to adjourn the meeting.

Vote: Yes – Unanimous

Jennifer Nicles adjourned the meeting at 8:23 p.m.

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date Board Secretary