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NEWS

'Insubordinate' and a 'failure': APS board members bash superintendent in scathing review

Jennifer Pignolet Akron Beacon Journal

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Members of the Akron Public Schools board offered a stunning rebuke of their new superintendent in her first evaluation, calling her "insubordinate" and labeling her first year on the job a "failure."

Others on the seven-person board were more positive in their review of Superintendent Christine Fowler Mack, praising her for certain initiatives and approving of her communication with the board and employees.

The document was completed and signed June 27 and released through a public records request.

Tensions between the board and the superintendent — whom the board chose as its leader just one year ago — have simmered for months, including around the board's delayed approval of new positions Fowler Mack proposed, the process for planning to spend the district's nearly \$100 million in stimulus dollars and the future of the former high school in Kenmore.

The evaluation marks a significant escalation of that tension, and the first notable public airing of grievances that now raises questions about how Fowler Mack and the board move forward.

Board president offers significant criticism

Board President N.J. Akbar offered the harshest criticism of Fowler Mack — Akron's first female superintendent — stopping short of calling for her resignation but leaving seemingly little path forward for her to continue in her role.

"This relationship has completely failed solely due to her unwillingness, inflexibility and resistance which is quite irreparable," Akbar said. "The District can no longer sustain this type of dysfunctional operation with inadequate leadership who prioritizes political and business stakeholders' feedback over the Board's feedback."

He hammered her approach to equity work, advising she attend professional seminars on the topic — "if she is actually open to learning" — and explained in the review that equity means resources should be given out by need, not equally distributed.

"The Superintendent's failure this year has been underscored by her surface level understanding of leading on equity," Akbar said.

Her "philosophy and approach," he said, are "fundamentally misaligned" with the boards' vision and priorities. Akbar continued that her interview for the job was misleading.

"A preponderance of observations this year provide a much different picture than what she portrayed in her interview for the position," he said. "The dissonance of our present lived reality and what she presented in her candidacy varies far too greatly."

Akbar said by phone Friday he stands by his comments, and the board as a whole stands by its evaluation. He declined to comment on individual points in the review or about what could come as a result of it, citing it as a personnel matter.

"I do not think that it's helpful to have a public discussion about personnel matters," Akbar said. "I think that's best left between the board and the employee."

But he said he hoped parents and staff in the district would take away that the board "is deeply committed to the success of the district and deeply committed to the success of every child in this district."

'Culture of fear'

The board meets Monday, and Akbar said he would announce that the review has been completed. Fowler-Mack is out of town and will not be at the meeting.

The review focused mostly on Fowler Mack's performance and relationship to the board but also raised questions about a "culture of fear" in the district's central office, citing an anonymous letter from a group of administrative staff. The Beacon Journal filed a records request Friday for a copy of the letter.

Fowler Mack declined to comment beyond her response in the evaluation, in which she said she seeks to find a way forward in light of their common ground on caring deeply about education and children and their families.

"It was with that understanding that I reviewed and considered seriously the encouraging feedback and the suggestions for improvement included in each member's evaluation of my leadership and of our work," Fowler Mack said. "I feel it would be counter-productive to unpack each instance of feedback. Therefore, I will consider this evaluation in its totality as I work closely with each of you this year to build on our success and to work through any challenges that might hinder our ability to work cohesively in our collective mission to provide the highest-quality education for every child."

'Superintendent has become increasingly insubordinate'

Akbar characterizes Fowler Mack as a failure of a leader, an insubordinate employee who deliberately speaks mistruths and a barrier to progress, which he said has only been possible in spite of her.

"The superintendent's direction will result in the district failing to meet the urgency of this moment to address historic harms and inequities," Akbar said in the review. "Her refusal to acknowledge them or shift her approach is on track to missing our opportunity to substantially reduce student outcome differentials. Most major decisions and forward progress in critical areas has occurred despite her and with her noticeable inaction."

Akbar said Fowler Mack is too focused on how things were done in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, where she last worked before coming to Akron, and that she "meets very frequently with the (Akron) Mayor's Office and behaves in the manner that the Mayor directs the efforts of the district and has jurisdiction over her employment."

"There is only her vision and her model — there is not a shared vision," he said. "The approach experienced this year has been do it exactly as I say."

Monthly meetings with board leadership and Fowler Mack have shown some promise, he said, but noted she has a "lack of awareness... regarding the adverse effects of her inflexibility and downright refusal which parallels insubordination."

He twice accuses her of "shutting down" in meetings.

"There's been an active resistance to receiving any constructive feedback," Akbar said. "The Board's feedback is not accepted and in fact often is met with packing up, staring in silence

and shutting down completely.

"Superintendent has become increasingly insubordinate."

Presentations that Fowler Mack makes to the board, Akbar said, are "well designed" with "wonderful illustrations" but "do not align with lived reality in our schools or directly with our own experiences as Board members."

Akbar said Fowler Mack has resisted feedback to "shift away from directing the Board and others to 'stay in their lane' to a more productive approach that would allow her to get to know the team."

"This failure has lingering negative effects on relationships and have created a toxic and distrustful relationship with those working directly with her," he said.

Akbar also presses Fowler Mack on the delay in conducting a living wage study, which the board asked for in October but has not yet materialized. Akbar said instead of a study of what the district pays its employees in comparison to what constitutes a living wage in Akron, Fowler Mack embarked on a study that would compare the rates of Akron's wages to that of comparable jobs elsewhere.

He said she then later blamed the board for not being clear, and then a consultant for not delivering what she'd asked.

"It was obvious that this was not truthful," Akbar said. "Incidents like this erodes trust and makes it hard to move forward in a good direction because we must inquire on the integrity of the information being received."

Vice president also voices concerns

Board Vice President Derrick Hall also called the relationship between the board and the superintendent "extremely challenging."

"Board members have openly accused the Superintendent of being misleading and I have had several board members share with me that the Superintendent has been untruthful on many occasions," Hall said. "Let us not confuse quantity of communication with quality of communication."

Hall said in his own meetings with her, he has not always felt heard, and that multiple one-on-one meetings between the superintendent and individual board members result in

disconnect that amounts to "an adult version of telephone."

"There is an opportunity for a higher degree of professionalism," Hall said. "Disagreements should not always create tension."

Aside from the relationship with the board, however, Hall said he has concerns about the overall culture in the administration building. The board, he said in his review, received a letter from central office staff calling themselves the "Educator 16," which "referenced many concerns," including the process used to hire a new assistant superintendent.

According to Hall, the board gave the superintendent feedback that although she has the right to appoint her own cabinet, "it has had a negative impact on the culture" of the central office. Board members encouraged her to implement an interview process for any open job.

"Despite the sharing of this feedback the Superintendent recently decided to appoint for the most recent position as well," he said.

In other sections of the review, Hall offered Fowler Mack praise, including that she "has done a nice job of guiding our foundational equity work" and has done "an excellent job" with comprehensive notes she sends to board members every Friday with ongoings in the district.

Other board members give mixed feedback

Board member Valerie McKitrick called the relationship with Fowler Mack "tenuous" and said the superintendent doesn't appear to understand the role of board members as elected officials.

"To be effective, there needs to be a level of trust that appears to be lacking," McKitrick said. "There is little to no collaboration with the board, and feedback is rarely accepted. There is little to no evidence of introspection/self-evaluation."

McKitrick was the only other board member to mention the letter received from the central office staff.

"As evidenced in the letter from the Educators 16, the superintendent needs to develop a fair, equitable process for hiring/promoting/recommending personnel," she said.

Other board members offered ways for Fowler Mack to grow, but did not espouse the same level of discontentment with their employee and, in some cases, directly contradicted what their colleagues wrote.

"As a result of meetings held with the superintendent and other central office staff I posit that the superintendent displayed (an) open attitude and was very forthcoming in regards to answering any questions that I might have had," board member Carla Jackson wrote.

Jackson added that Fowler Mack "models professional conduct and does bring matters before the board that require board action and or approval."

She pushed Fowler Mack to regularly share data with the board and to create action plans with "short time lines."

The board's longest tenured member, Bruce Alexander, also offered Fowler Mack praise in her first year. The areas where growth is needed, he said, are areas that take time.

"Mrs. Fowler-Mack has worked hard on her communication with Board Members, her administration, district staff, the union, and corporate partners to collaborate and communicate the direction she feels the district should move," Alexander said. "Since Mrs. Fowler-Mack is still fresh to the district, this will be an area she will need to continue to develop. Her collaboration with staff and the community has been good thus far."

The superintendent took the strategic plan the board created before her arrival and has built upon it, he said.

"This work takes time to review and assess before moving in a direction (that she) and her administration (feel) the district needs to move," he said. "I believe she has been steadily making progress in this area."

Board member Diana Autry, who was initially the lone dissenting voice in hiring Fowler Mack but changed her vote to show support when she was outnumbered, gave a mostly positive review.

Autry praised Fowler Mack for several concrete action items, including creating a long-term planning process for the district's facilities, a "Be Kind 330" campaign, implementing suggestions from a communications committee Autry chaired and working to build a positive relationship with the board.

"Relationship building is ongoing work," Autry said. "I agree with comments that it is growing and developing in a positive direction."

Board member Job Perry, sworn in with Jackson at the beginning of this year, wrote positive feedback about the superintendent.

He praised Fowler Mack for developing a shared vision, for engaging the board and staff, and for her "strong communication skills."

"I have the utmost faith this will continue in the coming school year," Perry said.

Perry said by phone Friday he had not personally experienced or witnessed any of the negative incidents or characterizations of Fowler Mack shared by some of his board colleagues in the review.

"Certainly the reflections of some of the board members are not the reflection of all of the board members," he said.

Perry said he "wholly" disagrees with the notion that the district is dysfunctional, or that the superintendent is inflexible or unwilling to learn, adding that she is just completing her first year in the job.

"She has shown the ability to learn, to work with us and I think that that continues to grow," he said. "It's not perfect, but it will continue to improve."

Contact education reporter Jennifer Pignolet at jpignolet@thebeaconjournal.com, at 330-996-3216 or on Twitter @JenPignolet.