

**REPORT TO THE BOARD OF EDUCATION OF HIGH MOUNT SCHOOL DISTRICT
NO. 116**

The following is a report to the Board of Education of my investigation as District Complaint Manager pursuant to Board Policy Number 2:260. Because the Complaint is directed toward the Superintendent, this Report is made to the Board of Education rather than the Superintendent.

I. THE COMPLAINT

Board Secretary Susan Ackerman received a letter dated June 4, 2018 from Lana Turley, Field Service Director for the Illinois Federation of Teachers. Ms. Turley wrote to Ms. Ackerman, as Complaint Manager, regarding an employee who wished to file a Complaint. The purpose of the letter was to request a meeting with Ms. Ackerman regarding the Complaint. A copy of Ms. Turley's letter is attached hereto as Exhibit A.

Thereafter, Superintendent Mark Halwachs, Ms. Ackerman, and I as Board President received a letter from Attorney Jason Caraway advising that he had been retained by the Illinois Federation of Teachers. The letter contains the specifics of the Complaint filed by District Social Worker Yvette Hicks. Ms. Hicks alleged that on May 1, 2018, Superintendent Mark Halwachs held a meeting to prepare for a visit from a reporter and a photographer from the BND. Ms. Hicks alleged that at the meeting Mr. Halwachs said that he did not want any pictures taken of "the black kids" during the BND visit.

Ms. Hicks further stated that Mr. Halwachs apologized to her the next day, and that both Resource Officer Cheryl Venorsky and Principal George Wilkerson, who were present when the statement was made, apologized to her for Mr. Halwachs' comment.

In his letter, Mr. Caraway further suggested that it would be a conflict of interest for Ms. Ackerman to act as Complaint Manager because she would in effect be investigating a complaint made against Mr. Halwachs, her supervisor.

Ms. Ackerman was replaced as Complaint Manager by Jarvis Taylor, Marco Carter, and me, who comprise the personnel committee. Jarvis and Marco attended the first interview with Ms. Hicks; I was unavailable. Ms. Hicks and her representation objected to three people acting as Complaint Manager because Board Policy provides for the appointment of a "person" as Complaint Manager.

After the first interview with Ms. Hicks, the decision was made that I would henceforth act as the sole Complaint Manager. I did have access to the notes made at the first interview of Ms. Hicks.

II. THE INVESTIGATION

Pursuant to Board Policy Section 2:260, I was charged with investigating the Complaint. I reviewed notes from the first meeting with Ms. Hicks, and met with Principal George Wilkerson, School Resource Officer Cheryl Venorsky, Superintendent Mark Halwachs, and I re-interviewed Yvette Hicks.

III. FINDINGS

All of the witnesses agree that on May 1, 2018, a meeting was held to prepare for an upcoming visit by a reporter and photographer from the BND. The reporter was planning a story featuring SRO Venorsky, and planned to interview and shadow her.

The meeting was held at approximately 8:40 a.m. in the office shared by Officer Venorsky and Ms. Hicks, which is near the Principal's Office. Present were Superintendent Mark

Halwachs, Principal George Wilkerson, School Resource Officer Cheryl Venorsky, and Social Worker Yvette Hicks.

All of the witnesses agree that Mr. Halwachs said at the meeting that he did not want “black kids” or “African-American kids” in the area of the front office when the BND reporter and photographer came. It has been the practice at the school to have students who were serving detention to be sent to an area immediately adjacent to the office shared by Ms. Hicks and Officer Venorsky.

All of the witnesses agree that Ms. Hicks was offended by Mr. Halwachs’ comment, and Mr. Wilkerson and Officer Venorsky both agreed that Ms. Hicks was visibly upset. Ms. Hicks said that Mr. Halwachs’ comments has caused her to lose sleep and that she has suffered emotional distress.

Ms. Hicks, Officer Venorsky, and Mr. Wilkerson were each surprised by Mr. Halwachs’ comments, and none of them could recall Mr. Halwachs having made a similar statement in the past. The witnesses other than Ms. Hicks said that when Ms. Hicks indicated that she was offended, Mr. Halwachs said that he meant he didn’t want any kids in the “detention area” when the reporter and photographer were there, and that he meant to refer to all students.

Mr. Halwachs apologized to Ms. Hicks the day after he made the statement, and told her that he did not intend to offend her and that he is not a racist.

Neither Mr. Wilkerson nor Officer Venorsky can remember Mr. Halwachs doing or saying anything that would lead them to believe he is a racist, and neither of them believes that Mr. Halwachs’ comments were said with a racist intent.

Mr. Halwachs said that his intent was to avoid having students who were serving detention being photographed, as it would send the wrong message about High Mount students.

He said, "We have great kids." The newspaper article featured a photograph that included African-American students.

IV. CONCLUSION

Mr. Halwachs' comment to the effect that he did not want black or African-American students in the detention area when the BND reporter and photographer were there were regrettable, and I believe Ms. Hicks when she says she was offended and upset by Mr. Halwachs' remarks. Based upon Mr. Halwachs' history at High Mount, and the comments of Mr. Wilkerson and Ms. Hicks, as well as Mr. Hawlachs' explanation, I believe that Mr. Halwachs' comment, while offensive to Ms. Hicks, was inadvertent and unintentional. Both Mr. Halwachs and Ms. Hicks stated that they were friends, and it is difficult to believe that Mr. Halwachs would have intentionally said something in front of Ms. Hicks that he knew would have been offensive. It is worth noting that the photo appeared in the BND showed African-American students.

Ms. Hicks complaint does bring light to something that I believe should be addressed by the Board. High Mount has a significant percentage of minority students, which approaches or exceeds 40% of the student body. High Mount's faculty and staff do not reflect that diversity, and while the faculty, administrators, and staff are all about High Mount students, to my knowledge they have never received counseling or instruction on how to address issues presented by the fact that minority and lower-income students make up such a significant part of our student body. In my opinion, it is in the best interest of the administration, faculty, staff, and students of High Mount that all High Mount employees receive sensitivity training focused on such issues. I therefore recommend the Board of Education direct Administration to arrange with an outside source to provide sensitivity training of all employees, focused on issues pertaining to

minority students, families, and staff. In addition, I recommend that the Board of Education direct administration to actively recruit a minority candidate for staff and faculty positions.

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Wolf
Complaint Manager