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Randy Fine
Florida House of Representatives
State Representative, District 53

June 13, 2018

Brevard County School Board
2700 Judge Fran Jamieson Way,
Melbourne, FL 32940

SENT VIA E-MAIL

Dear Members of the School Board,

I write you today in the aftermath of your decision yesterday to short-circuit the process you had promised the public and forgo any interviews or parental input in the selection of your next superintendent. As this letter will illustrate, however, perhaps I should not be surprised – your next superintendent does not believe the public is qualified to have an opinion about their children's' education.

I would have shared this at the appropriate time if you had followed through on your process, but even having made a decision, I feel it necessary to have this part of the written record. Most of you have heard this story from me directly in the past, but by memorializing it in writing, it can never be said you were unaware of these facts. I owe it to my constituents to share it with you, as similar circumstances have happened to some of them. I owe it to you as it will explain our working relationship moving forward.

I write you not about policy and not with the perspective of an elected official, but as the parent of a school-age child who used to attend Brevard Public Schools. You see, Wendy and I had intended for both of our boys to go to public schools. We selected our home when we moved back to Brevard based, in part, on its school district. Both of us went through the public school system and graduated from public high schools. My mother was a public middle school science teacher. We wanted the same for our children.

Committees and Subcommittees:

Vice Chairman, Careers & Competition Subcommittee -- Commerce Committee -- Joint Legislative Auditing Committee
Natural Resources & Public Lands Subcommittee -- Transportation & Tourism Appropriation Subcommittee
Tourism & Gaming Control Subcommittee
Chairman, Brevard County Delegation

June 13, 2018

Members of the School Board

But they don't go to public school. They go to private school, something that costs us more than \$10,000 a year per child. Something we never planned on or for. Something that often comes up now that I am elected official – I get criticized for putting my kids in private school. The critics don't know that our oldest started in public school. They don't know that we wanted to keep him there. They don't know why our children now go to private school.

There is one man responsible for that decision. The person you believe best qualified to lead the education of all of our children.

In August of 2013 we enrolled our eldest, Jacob, at Gemini Elementary, our traditional district school, for Kindergarten. He had a wonderful teacher and a wonderful year and we were very happy with the school. In August of 2014, we re-enrolled him for first grade, and again had a wonderful teacher. Things were going well – he and his classmates were growing and thriving, and then in the early spring, with no notice whatsoever other than a note home the night before, his teacher, who he had grown to love – as first graders do – almost like a third parent, was yanked from the classroom.

Shocked by this move, Wendy and I, along with a number of other parents went to the principal of the school to get answers. We assumed that either the teacher was sick or disciplinary action had been taken. We were wrong. To our surprise, we were told that Brevard Public Schools had just registered Gemini Elementary as a Title 1 school, meaning more than 40% of the students from Melbourne Beach and the South Beaches were certified as coming from lower-income families eligible for free or reduced school lunch. As part of this classification of Melbourne Beach as a lower-income community, Brevard Public Schools had received Title 1 funding to move a teacher into a tutoring role to help the school's large population of lower-income third graders prepare for statewide testing. The principal assigned our son's teacher to that new Title 1 role.

When we asked if the move of our son's teacher could wait a couple months, until the end of the year, thus not disrupting the routines, curriculum, and learned behavioral harmony in our son's class, we were refused. The principal further informed us that the new teacher had not taught in five years, had never taught first grade, and had never taught in Florida.

Frustrated with the decision, but powerless to change it, we hoped for the best with this new teacher. Over the next few weeks, our worst fears came to pass. The new teacher dramatically reduced the amount of work being done in the classroom and used disciplinary techniques appropriate for brand new first graders. We watched our son's handwriting worsen daily as he did little-to-no work in class and we watched and heard stories of worsening classroom behavior and disruption on the parts of the students. And in the straw that broke the camel's back, when grading our son's spelling test, the new teacher was either so harried, incompetent or a combination thereof that she made many mistakes in grading spelling tests and math homework. She told our son that the word "because" was spelled "b cause" and "astronaut" was properly spelled as "astronut." She also told him that 15-2 equaled 12.

June 13, 2018

Members of the School Board

Horrified, we, and a number of parents went back to the principal and demanded that the former teacher, who was still in the school, but just doing test prep tutoring for older children apparently funded by Melbourne Beach's new status as a low-income community, be put back in the first-grade classroom. Test prep could wait – our children's' first grade year could not. The principal refused.

So we did what any concerned parents would do – we went to the principal's supervisor, the Area Superintendent. Well, we didn't actually go, because the Area Superintendent refused to meet with us or any of the other parents involved. He said he did not have time to meet with parents.

We paid his salary, but as a public official, he didn't have time to meet with parents who had an issue with one of his direct reports?

After making a number of calls, I was able to get the Area Superintendent on the phone. I'd note I was not an elected official, just a normal parent of a BPS child. I'll never forget the parking lot I was sitting in when I spoke to him, with one of my colleagues in the passenger seat listening in. After reiterating that he did not have time to meet with the parents, he told me I was not qualified to have an opinion about my son's education as I was not a certified academic administrator with what he considered a relevant college degree. When I told him about the fact that the new teacher could neither spell nor subtract and had to be replaced with someone who actually knew what they were doing, he responded by stating, "You may be right, but we cannot make a habit out of doing things just because parents ask us to."

We had no choice but to withdraw Jacob from public school the following day. It was a decision we were sad to make, but have never regretted. Our only regret is that not every family had the same options we did.

So who was the Area Superintendent who refused to meet with parents to discuss their issues with his direct report and about the education their taxes paid for? Who was it who told me I was unqualified to have an opinion about my own child's education? Who was it that admitted that it was unacceptable for my child to have a teacher who could neither spell nor count but that he was not going to make a change anyway because he did not want to be shown reacting to parents?

Dr. Mark Mullins.

To my amazement, Dr. Mullins was later promoted from that Area Superintendent position to serve as the Chief Operating Officer of Brevard Public Schools. And now you intend to hire him as Superintendent.

Since you have not yet finalized his contract, I am writing in the strongest terms possible to encourage you to revisit the decision and not to hire Dr. Mullins. Someone who displays these attitudes to parents has no business in education, let alone leading it.

June 13, 2018

Members of the School Board

Your experiences with Dr. Mullins may be different than mine, but you must remember that you are an elected official. While they shouldn't, we are often treated differently because of our position. But I do know that our situation at Gemini was not unique and there are many other parents who had similar situations with Dr. Mullins. Their children may still be part of the BPS system, so I don't know whether they will speak out as well. But they exist, and I am certain even a cursory investigation into complaints made during this principal's tenure will uncover multiple similar situations.

The data proves what happened at Gemini under Dr. Mullins watch. A school that was more than 100% full when we moved back to Brevard County was at less than 60% utilization just a few years later. In fact, utilization was so low that under BPS rules, students were not allowed to transfer to open spots at other elementary schools in the County (under the rules, the first 25% of capacity could transfer out, but once under 75%, students were forced to remain in the school, unless going to a choice school.) Contrary to your certification of Melbourne Beach as a low-income area, many parents had either the time to home school or the money for private school and they abandoned the school in droves.

Moving forward, as I work on K-12 education policy, I intend to be single-mindedly focused on ensuring that Brevard's parents have access to educational opportunities where their opinions are valued and where educational leaders do what is right, whether or not the idea comes from a parent. It is unfortunate that your new leadership will not share those same goals.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Randy Fine". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a distinct "F".

Randy Fine

State Representative, District 53

cc: The Honorable Jose Oliva, Speaker-Designate of the Florida House of Representatives