



J. Michael Clára
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District Two

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23 December 2013

DELIVERED: United States Postal Service
The Honorable Rebecca D. Lockhart
Speaker of the Utah House of Representatives
1413 S. 1710 E.
Provo, Utah 84606

Re: Response to Superintendent & Board President's December 17th Letter

Dear Speaker Lockhart,

This letter is in response to Superintendent Withers and Board President Swett's letter¹ that referenced the recommendations I submitted to members of the Legislative Education Task Force in late November².

Sadly, the Withers/Swett letter serves to demonstrate the mentality that I have been wrestling with during my first year of service on the Salt Lake City School Board.

On the one hand they proclaim "*...we have always been ready, willing, and able to engage in constructive deliberation with Mr. Clára*". Yet their actions this past year (including their letter to you) belies their assertion of openness.

You will note that they make no attempt to discuss the merits of my recommendations to the Task Force. They instead engage in accusing me of being "*uncivil*" while stating that the information I provided the Task Force was "*distorted, misrepresented, and ...wholly invented*", yet they offer no evidence to substantiate their characterizations of my recommendations.

I do believe that the recommendations and supporting documentation I offered to the Education Task Force in my November 20, 2013 letter speak for themselves. I have already had several substantive discussions with members of the Task Force about my recommendations and look forward to many more in the upcoming session.

As an elected member of the Salt Lake City School Board, I represent the largest number of ethnic minority students in Salt Lake City.

"Local school boards are the bedrock of our society, yet they are invisible to the public"
¹ Letter to Speaker Lockhart signed by Swett, Bennett, Withers & Roberts –dated December 17, [sic] 2013
² Letter to Speaker Lockhart by Michael Clara, Re: Clara Recommendations –dated November 20, 2013 *Señor Florez –Deseret News*

In fact, every school that I represent in District 2, is a designated Title I school. I believe that the school district bureaucracy has, over the years, neglected the schools in my community because they have erroneously concluded that “demographics is destiny”.

I find it curious that in the Withers/Swett letter, they would plead with you to “*encourage him [Mr. Clára] to bring his energy he currently devotes to letter writing and filing complaints to discussions at our board table*”.

Oddly enough, any “energy” that I have “devoted” to “letter writing” or “complaint filing” has always had its genius in the rejections of those issues in a school board meeting. Any attempt on my part to address the educational deficiencies in my community have been answered with a multitude of obstacles designed to ensure that the issues facing our most at-risk student population are never discussed or given the consideration that they deserve.

The obstacles that they have contrived in order to dodge local school board deliberations on improving the educational outcomes of students in my community include, but are not limited to the following: violation of Utah’s Election Code³, adding and deleting items to meeting agenda after the meeting was concluded⁴, refusal to place west side issues on the school board agenda⁵, abuse of school board meeting policy⁶, violation of Utah’s Open & Public Meetings Act⁷, board president attempted to remove items from the record of the previous meeting⁸, bureaucracy presenting the board with inaccurate information on the budget⁹, in violation of state law the superintendent bypassed the school board on the hiring of new principals¹⁰, superintendent’s refusal to discuss the teacher attrition issue in our Title 1 schools¹¹, misuse of parliamentary rules in order to silence me in the meeting because I questioned why the superintendent gets a 6% increase (above his salary) and our teachers only get a 1% increase¹², the superintendent bypassed the board of education’s approval process for state technology grant¹³, superintendent controlled/manipulated the process for his own evaluation¹⁴, bureaucracy’s refusal to provide the board with the financial details of the RDA agreement with SLC¹⁵, superintendent created a set of school board meeting policies designed to restrict the boards participation in school board meetings¹⁶, etc...

These diversional tactics are always peppered with attempts to malign my character and motives as you see them attempting to do in the December 17th letter they addressed to you. The problem for them is that people in my community know me and recognize the character attacks for what they are.

The superintendent has forgotten that I was elected by my neighbors to represent them. I was endorsed by both republican and democrat legislators. I was endorsed by the Salt Lake Teachers Association, Equality Utah and a multitude of opinion leaders within my community. Yet this past year he has treated me and my words with disdain and contempt whenever he was unsuccessful in silencing my representative voice.

³ School Board Meeting of January 8, 2013

⁴ School Board Meeting of January 22, 2013

⁵ School Board Meeting of February 19, 2013

⁶ School Board Meeting of March 5, 2013

⁷ School Board Meeting of March 5, 2013

⁸ School Board Meeting of April 9, 2013

⁹ School Board Meeting of May 7, 2013

¹⁰ School Board Meeting of July 9, 2013

¹¹ School Board Meeting of July 9, 2013

¹² School Board Meeting of August 6, 2013

¹³ School Board Meeting of October 1, 2013

¹⁴ School Board Meeting of October 15, 2013

¹⁵ School Board Meeting of October 15, 2013

¹⁶ School Board Meeting of November 5, 2013

In an effort to provide some context to the superintendent's and board president's portrayal of my recommendations to the Task Force, I would ask that you contrast their description of me with the public statements made about me by members of the Legislative Education Task Force:

"Michael Clara has been in the Salt Lake School District for less than one year and I believe has advocated for the schools and children in his neighbors probably more than any person I have ever met in the time that I have been associated with school board across this state...When you talk about using data, Michael Clara uses more data than any other school board member I have ever met to prove his point. While he is labeled as an obstructionist by his superintendent...I would say that we need more Michael Clara[s] more people who are willing to advocate for their schools..."¹⁷

Senator Howard Stephenson

My neighbors further recognize that our students are dropping out of high school at an alarming rate and it is due to the neglect of the system that starts in the elementary schools. A 52% dropout rate of Hispanic students in the Salt Lake City School district is not only a local problem but has statewide implications. The negligence demonstrated by the Salt Lake City School District's superintendent and the board president have statewide implications in that the superintendent is serving as the president of the Utah Superintendent's Association and the board president service as the vice president of the Utah School Board Association.

The tone of their letter to you, summarizes the interactions I have had with them all year. Instead of addressing the issues facing our most at-risk students they instead want to attack, marginalize, label and discredit the messenger. Most of our school board meetings are absent any quantitative data on student achievement and are instead filled with back-slapping congratulatory talk about how the adults running the Salt Lake City School District are the smartest in the state of Utah when it comes to matters of education. It appears to me that they have to do this in order to keep themselves pacified and convinced that "all is well". These self induced prostrations are often accompanied with finger pointing outside of their contorted bureaucracy, proclaiming that the problem is out there.

Superintendent Withers and Board President Swett would do well to reacquaint themselves with follow the wise counsel offered by Senator Stuart Reid to the the Utah School Board Association leadership (which included Kristi Swett):

"If you don't like someone speaking out, we ostracize them, somehow we identify them different than we are, or out of the mainstream...I don't think it helps any of us to try to quiet someone in the opposition, it is that noise that causes everybody to look at it in a more holistic way and question whether their approach really is the best approach...rather than trying to push for conformity, it seems to me that we should be empowering people to speak up and to represent their individual districts... As to the relationship of the superintendent and the school board, the primary function in our form of government...is for the school board is to provide oversight to the administration, first and foremost, above all other considerations...I would just caution you to not establish a culture where the person who does speak out, who does disagrees, who want to fight for the people he thinks are under represented within the system, somehow they are ostracized or belittled because they are doing what they feel is very important and sometimes they think they need to speak louder because they are not being heard...I encourage Michael Clara to speak up...because the westside does not receive all of the advantages...sometimes it is due to pure ignorance or discrimination...so I applaud Michael Clara he is fighting an uphill battle and he is trying to represent people that are under represented...I think that it is unfortunate that he is labeled for speaking up and speaking out loudly, I believe that should be encouraged..."¹⁸

¹⁷ Utah Legislature Education Task Force Committee – Tuesday, October 22, 2013

¹⁸ Utah Legislature Education Task Force Committee – Tuesday, October 22, 2013

I hope you can now, better understand why I have had to look for solutions beyond the constricting confines of the local school board (i.e. Utah Legislature Education Task Force¹⁹, U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights²⁰ etc). It is because of the demonstrated display of indifference to me and those that I represent, I have been compelled to broaden the scope of pursuing resolutions to the educational deficiencies facing our most vulnerable student population

I hope that I have established that I am committed to ensuring that the Salt Lake City School District bureaucracy will one day give the schools in my community the needed resources in order to improve the educational outcomes of the children in our neighborhoods. The diversional tactics that the bureaucracy throws in my path will not stop me, nor does it even slow me down. On the contrary, it exponentially accelerates by resolve and desire to give our teachers the resources they need to help our students reach new heights in their educational achievements.

In conclusion, I once again express my appreciation for the formation of the Legislative Task Force on Education. As you can see from the tone and substance that comes from the current leadership of the Salt Lake City School district there is a need for a prevailing counterbalance to "right the ship" of public education in the state of Utah.

Shalom,



J. Michael Clára
Board Member, District 2

P.S. "Education is transformational. It changes lives. That is why people work so hard to become educated and why education has always been the key to the American Dream, the force that erases arbitrary divisions of race and class and culture and unlocks every person's God-given potential." (CR)

cc: President Niederhauser
Senator Reid
Senator Stephenson
Senator Osmond
Senator Urquhart
Representative Hughes
Representative King
Ms. Sandra Sanchez, Esq. -OCR
Board President Swett
Superintendent Withers

Enclosure



¹⁹ Clara Recommendations – November 20, 2013

²⁰ Compliant to OCR: Disparities in Instructional Resources – February 26, 2013