



J. Michael Clára
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District Two

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Delivered Via Electronic Mail
Kristi Swett, President
% Board of Education
2256 South King Street
Salt Lake City, Utah 84109

Re: PR Firm Questions

Dear President Swett,

This letter is in response to your email that I received late last night with the subject of RFP. I hope you realize that your email does not shed any further light on why this was done in secret and kept from the school board. Your explanations were already reported in the Salt Lake Tribune three days ago. Which by the way is my best source of information on what the school bureaucracy is doing in an attempt to solve this issue. That would be okay if I was a member of the public, it is not okay for a member of the board of education.

The part of your email that may be new to me is the following statement:

The RFP is not a contract or a purchase and the district has not spent any money for this professional service. We are not recommending that we go forward with this option at this time.

- ❖ Am I understanding correctly, that you are now saying that the school bureaucracy is NOT going to hire the PR Firm that the Tribune reported on Wednesday, was already hired?
- ❖ When you say “we”, who are you referring to?

As you are aware, this lunchroom issue continues to be the topic of discussion throughout the entire community. I continue to receive phone calls and emails. When I go to a school, to church, community council meeting, shopping, out to eat, walk down the street etc... people want to talk about this issue. The topic of discussion is no longer the incident itself but how poorly this has been mishandled by the superintendent.

“Local school boards are the bedrock of our society, yet they are invisible to the public”
Señor Florez –Deseret News

My response is always the same:

"This is nothing new to me and I am not at all surprised by the behavior of the district administration".

I go on to explain that the only difference is that this incident is more in the public eye. I also explain that the foundational problem is what I have maintained all year:

There is a lack of board oversight. The majority of the school board has abdicated their authority and allowed McKell Withers and Janet Roberts to run the board and the District with no counterbalance to call into check their outrageous behavior

This form of government works best when the elected officials provide proper oversight and require proper accountability. Handing complete control of the District to the school bureaucracy is what is causing the current problem and what has been the source of friction between me and the majority of the board for the past year.

Recognizing that it is your custom to ignore my requests and questions, I nevertheless pose the following, hoping of course that in this instance, you will extend to me the courtesy of providing me answers.

Following the board's Tuesday night meeting the, Tribune ran a story titled:

After tossed lunches, Utah district eyes \$49,999 PR Hire

The story states that you, Heather and McKell made the decision to hire a PR firm.

- Was Heather accurately quoted when she stated she did not know how the \$49,999 was derived?
- Does she really not see any significance to the amount \$49,999?
- Why did the three of you not inform the board about the hiring of an outside PR Firm?

Heather clearly missed the point about hiding the RFP from the rest of the board. The concern isn't bringing every RFP to the board, it's the breaking of board policy in having a select number of board members deliberate in secret. Because an issue is uncomfortable to the superintendent does not mean we throw transparency out the door.

I have the following questions about the RFP process:

- How were the seven firms selected?
- Do any of those on the selection committee have a conflict of interest?
- Who comprised the committee that chose Vox Creative?

- Does the district have any prior history with Vox Creative?
- How many companies responded?
- What was the criteria for selection?

I also question Jason Olsen's explanation on the need to hire a PR Firm.

- Does it really take hiring a firm to see what the district did well, did poorly and where changes can be made?

I submit, that the Snapp Conner PR firm already answered that in the article. It's really rather simple:

- **Apologize**
- **Respond Quickly**
- **Resolve the Problem**
- I would add: **Accept Responsibility**

I would also disagree with Heather's assertion for the need of multiple PR people just because other districts may or may not have them. Here again, Heather has missed the point. This isn't an issue of the district having one, two or three PR persons, nor is it about the pay of the one we do have. I would also add that Jason Olsen should not be wasting his time responding to comments on the Tribune's comment line.

If the district's fulltime PR person is the problem, because he initially stated there was no mistake made and he waited a day to acknowledge the mistake and issue an apology, then he should be reprimand or replaced.

- At the end of the day, how does paying someone else 2:3 of his salary fix his mistake?
- Or, was he following administrative directives to initially not take responsibility and not apologize?
- Is someone else to blame for no apology on the first day?

I posed many of these questions in a letter to McKell and he responded that he handed it over to his attorney and that she would respond.

I also mentioned to the superintendent, that when all board members are under attack for poor administrative handling of any issue, board members should be apprised of all activities around the issue. This is not the first time I have stated the need for keeping all board members informed, not just a select few.

By way of illustration. Last Friday I sent you a letter calling for an outside independent investigation on the lunchroom issue. On Sunday you sent an email to all board members advising that an independent investigation would indeed occur. On Tuesday night you again informed the board in open session. There was clearly no opposition from any board member on this course of action. That is what transparency looks like!

➤ Why didn't you handle the hiring of the Public Relations Firm in the same manner?

In conclusion, I take exception to this statement in your email:

"The recent Request for Proposals (RFP) from local public relations firms was initiated in response to district and board leadership wanting to consider the option of having an external group of professionals critique and make recommendations to improve the district's ability to communicate to our various stakeholders in open, transparent, efficient, and effective ways, after the conclusion of any and all investigations related to school lunches."

This is contrary to the School Board Handbook:

THE STATEMENT OR ACTION OF AN INDIVIDUAL MEMBER OR GROUP OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION DOES NOT BIND THE BOARD OF EDUCATION ITSELF, EXCEPT WHEN THAT STATEMENT OR ACTION IS SPECIFICALLY AUTHORIZED BY OFFICIAL ACT OF THE BOARD

As you recall, Attorney Robson advised us that the handbook has the force of school board policy. It is contrary to policy for a subgroup of the board to make decisions like this. Calling the subgroup "board leadership" does not make it right.

Besides, I see this isolated group of "district and board leadership" consistently making disastrous decisions on behalf of the district. Clearly, there is wisdom in bringing issues of this magnitude before the entire board in a transparent manner.

I cannot stress enough, our salvation in this matter is **TRANSPARENCY** and having the entire board sit in council with each other, making informed decisions within the context of deliberations. Poor decisions made in secret will only serve to further erode the public trust and make a mockery of our school district and its purposes.

Shalom,

J. Michael Clára
Board Member, District 2

P.S. It is also very silly to suggest that a PR Firm hired in secret was going to help us "critique and make recommendations to improve the district's ability to communicate to our various stakeholders in open, transparent, efficient, and effective ways.."

