



J. Michael Clára  
Salt Lake City School Board  
District Two

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16 September 2014

DELIVERED VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL TO MEMBERS OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

Mrs. Kristi Swett, Board President  
Salt Lake City School District  
2256 South King St.  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84109

Agenda: Internal/Communications and External Relations

Dear Mrs. Swett,

This letter is in response to an email exchange that I read last night, between board member Laurel Young and one of the Uintah parents in reference to discussions at future school board meetings.

Today's school board agenda list the following item:

**Internal/Communications and External Relations**

I am requesting that at tonight's meeting, we dispense with "good news only" culture and instead have a substantive conversation about how to improve this school district's internal/external communications.

Far too often, our school board meetings are shallow and insignificant because fellow board members and/or the administrators will employ parliamentary tricks in an effort to set the stage for the degradation of civic discourse and at the same time erode the capacity for collective critical thinking.

I have also noted that certain board member's inquires are often labeled as "unanticipated questions" or "unfair" and then are quickly dismissed because it makes the superintendent feel uncomfortable.

I am convinced, that the sooner we can participate in school board meetings that don't dance around the superintendent's fragile ego, the sooner we will see improvements within the district.

Additionally, in order to facilitate the process of improvement, I believe it is essential that we attempt to understand the motivation behind the need for school administrators to lie to members of the school board and the public, when responding to questions about events within the bureaucracy. I'd like to understand why habitually lying is more worthwhile than telling the truth.

**"Local school boards are the bedrock of our society, yet they are invisible to the public"**

Señor Florez -Deseret News

In the school board meeting on September 2, 2014, you are quoted on KSL News as stating the following:

*"There was a multifaceted breakdown in communication that precipitated the situation at Uintah"*

That is one way of putting it. It would also be instructive to discuss the circumstances surrounding the decision to secretly hire a PR Firm back in February of this year. There were several questions that I posed in a letter to you on February 21, 2014, that have of yet to be answered (see attached).

Page | 2 of 2

During that same time period statements made by you and Heather Bennett deserve explanations within the context of tonight's discussion:

1. *"Many districts in the state have multiple people in public information, and we've only got one," Bennett said Tuesday. She said the board had considered hiring a firm years ago but decided against it. In light of the recent lunch issue as well as other questions, she, Swett and Withers decided it was time to look into it, Bennett said.* (After Tossed Lunches, Utah District Eyes \$49,999 PR Hire - Salt Lake Tribune 02/19/14)
2. *"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 additional independent and external feedback (performance audit) could be very helpful in meeting the board's expectations under the Internal Communications and External Relations essential of our 2010-2015 Student Achievement Plan."* (Kristi Swett Email to School Board and Administration 02/20/14)

In closing I echo the words of David Rodgers, which I believe describes the current state of affairs within the Salt Lake City School District:

In a world dominated by cronyism, self-congratulatory talk about "professionalism" is everywhere, as if people were trying to convince one another. It is a universal tool for the deflection of criticism.

No matter what outsiders to the system say, the response can always be:

**"We're the professionals. We know. They don't. We have credentials. They don't. End of discussion."**

What is different here is the absence of some countervailing power [School Board] to insist on something akin to professional results. The result is a situation in which people can administer failure constantly and, again, not feel like failures, protected both by the complexity of the organizational structure and by ideologies of "professionalism"

110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System by David Rodgers

Shalom,

J. Michael Clára  
Board Member, District 2

Enclosures (9)

P.S. I am requesting that this letter and attachment be made included part of the proceedings of tonight's school board meeting. Z





21 February 2014

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

J. Michael Clára

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INFORMATION**

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:

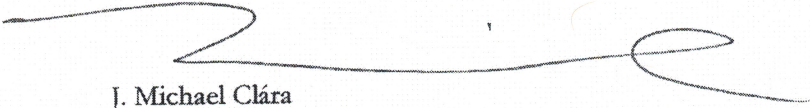
**THE STATEMENT OR ACTION OF AN INDIVIDUAL MEMBER OR GROUP OF MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION DOES NOT BIND THE BOARD OF EDUCATION ITSELF, EXCEPT WHEN THAT STATEMENT OR ACTION IS SPECIFICALLY AUTHORIZED BY OFFICIAL ACT OF THE BOARD**

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.

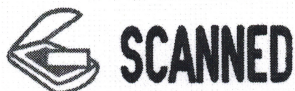
Besides, I see this isolated group of "district and board leadership" consistently making disastrous decisions on behalf of the district. Clearly, there is wisdom in bringing issues of this magnitude before the entire board in a transparent manner.

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.."



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

School board will decide on March 4 whether to pay Vox Creative to improve SLC district's image.

BY LISA SCHENCKER

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

PUBLISHED: FEBRUARY 19, 2014 06:42PM

UPDATED: FEBRUARY 19, 2014 10:43PM

As fallout continues over news that dozens of kids' lunches were dumped last month because of overdue payments, Salt Lake City School District leaders have quietly decided to try to hire a public relations firm.

The district issued a request for proposals from public relations firms for up to \$49,999 — \$1 shy of what's required for full board approval, according to the district's administrative procedures.

However, the board will decide at its March 4 meeting whether to approve payments to Vox Creative, the agency selected by a district committee, if there is a bill for services at that time, said Jason Olsen, district spokesman.

The deadline for companies to submit proposals was Friday. The request was not posted on the district's website but was sent to seven potential vendors, Olsen said.

Heather Bennett, board vice president, said she, board president Kristi Swett and Superintendent McKell Withers made the decision to seek public relations help. It was not mentioned at a board meeting earlier this month or a board study session Tuesday evening.

"Many districts in the state have multiple people in public information, and we've only got one," Bennett said Tuesday.

She said the board had considered hiring a firm years ago but decided against it. In light of the recent lunch issue as well as other questions, she, Swett and Withers decided it was time to look into it, Bennett said.

"We wanted some advice fairly quickly," she said.

The district made national and international news when dozens of kids had their cafeteria lunches taken from them and thrown away at Uintah Elementary last month because their parents were behind on payments. The kids were given fruit and milk instead.

Since then, the district has apologized and changed its procedures, pledging to only serve kids full lunches from now on and no longer talk with kids about their parents' debt. Still, the situation continues to make news as parents demand more answers about who was responsible and as district leaders continue to take action every few days.

District leaders have said they're still investigating what happened, and announced this week they'll have an independent auditor look into it as well.

Uintah parent Jessica Guynn, whose daughter had her lunch thrown away, said Wednesday she wonders why the district needs to hire a PR firm.

"I obviously wish the money could go toward actual education for children rather than repairing the reputation of the district," Guynn said.

Board member Michael Clara also said he feels it's not a good use of tax dollars.

"We're here to educate children, not worry about our image, and that could have been solved had they dealt with this honestly in the beginning," Clara said.

He called it "devious" for the district to put out a request for proposals for \$1 less than what's required for full board approval. He said he wasn't aware of the request until he heard about it unofficially, not from the district.

Bennett, however, said she doesn't see any significance to the \$49,999 amount, and she doesn't know why that amount was chosen specifically. Plus, she noted that the board does get a list of invoices to be paid at meetings, regardless of the amount of those invoices.



Al Hartmann | Tribune file photo Parents and children come and go at Uintah Elementary School about noon Thursday Jan. 30, 2014.

"If you tried to bring every RFP [request for proposal] before the board for discussion, the business of the school district would grind to a halt," Bennett said.

As for spending money on a public relations firm, she said, "We spend money on what we think we need in order to improve the overall operation of the district and sometimes that means you have to spend on things that are not directly involved in the classroom."

Olsen, the district's spokesman, makes a little more than \$75,000 a year.

The request for proposals seeks "public relations and information management and consultation services" to consist of tasks including crisis communication management. The request also asks proposing agencies to, "Present a detailed analysis of the most recent incident involving the Uintah lunch room incident at Uintah Elementary School."

Cheryl Snapp Conner, founder of Snapp Conner PR in South Jordan and a columnist for Forbes.com, called the district's handling of the situation so far a "case study in horrific PR."

She said the district should have apologized immediately and worked to resolve the situation as quickly as possible.

Olsen did not apologize for the incident during an initial interview with the Tribune a day after it occurred, but he did apologize in a statement later that evening, saying the district had learned more since that first conversation. Then, more than a week later, the district announced it would formally change its procedures, only serving full lunches and no longer discussing debt with kids.

The district and its board made news several other times as well, putting employees on leave, returning those employees from leave and announcing Tuesday night the board would arrange an independent audit.

"The longer a situation winds on, the more it spirals out of control, and now even the attempts to amend the situation become part of the news," Snapp Conner said. "It feeds on itself like a snowball."

Olsen said that's part of the reason the district wants to hire a PR firm, to see what the district did well, did poorly and where changes can be made in the future.

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Federal reaction: Taking away food punishes, stigmatizes kids

The January seizure of lunches from dozens of students in debt at Uintah Elementary got the attention of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which runs the National School Lunch Program.

Kevin Concannon, USDA under secretary, wrote to state superintendents across the country, listing steps to prevent potential issues in dealing with children with unpaid meal balances. The department believes it was an "isolated incident," he wrote.

But he added, "we believe that such an issue, should it arise again in the future, should be handled in a way that first and foremost respects and protects students from undue embarrassment and stigma."

The letter continues: "Denying or taking food away from children is a form of punishment and stigmatizes children whose parents are behind on payments."

According to the letter, federal law requires the department to study how schools handle children with unpaid meal balances, and the results of a national survey will soon be released. The department will also convene a group in the "near future" to find best practices having to do with the issue.





**COPY FOR YOUR INFORMATION**  
Michael Clara <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>

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## **Tribune: After tossed lunch debacle, Utah district eyes public relations hire**

1 message

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**Michael Clára** <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>

Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 2:07 PM

To: Heather Bennett <heatherbennett@xmission.com>, Kristi Swett <kristi.swett@slcschools.org>

Bcc: Michael Clara <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>

Shame on the two of you!

"Heather Bennett, board vice president, said she, board president Kristi Swett and Superintendent McKell Withers made the decision to seek public relations help."

This is contrary to 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**

We need to stop treating this school district like it is McKell's own little play ground. We absolutely have to stop spending money on protecting Janet & McKell. We have an obligation to give the children in the City an education.

This is a PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, our actions should be transparent not done in secret.

The way the two of you have been conspiring with the bureaucracy to cover up the truth of this incident is disgraceful.

Please stop this nonsense and think, meditate, ponder or pray on your reactions to this issue and reset your moral compass. Nothing good will come out of the direction the two of you are going with this.

Un abrazo,

**Michael Clára**

801-205-0389

Board Member, District 2



Michael Clark <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>  
**COPY FOR YOUR INFORMATION**

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**(no subject)**

1 message

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**rosemary emery** <rosemary.emery2@gmail.com>

Wed, Feb 19, 2014 at 7:07 PM

To: Kristi Swett <kristi.swett@slcschools.org>, Heather Bennett <heatherbennett@xmission.com>, McKell Withers <McKell.Withers@slcschools.org>

Bcc: donMiguelSLC@gmail.com

I am beyond distraught to see the article in the Trib tonight. I truly question your ethics. We were at a meeting just last night talking about the lunch issue and this RFP just slipped your mind, The lame excuse that the district would grind to a halt if all requests for money had to be reviewed by the board is just appalling. One dollar less then is needed for board approval. Really.

Perhaps you should stop listening to the lawyers you have hired and start listening to your conscience. Lets look at some of things you have done in the past few years: given yourselves free health insurance. broken the contract you have with the high school teachers, to save \$.5 million dollars lost multiple teachers by raising the FTE by,25 students, yet found the money for a \$100,000 lawyer and now money for a PR firm.

I will of course vote against this spending. The district office has plenty of employees. We need teachers in our classrooms. Our duty is to educate children not protect the board and give ourselves perks.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Emery



Michael Clara <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>

**COPY FOR YOUR  
INFORMATION**

## RFP

1 message

**Kristi Swett** <Kristi.Swett@slcschools.org>

Thu, Feb 20, 2014 at 8:10 PM

To: Heather Bennett <Heather.Bennett@slcschools.org>, Laurel Young <Laurel.Young@slcschools.org>, Doug Nelson <dougn@mdxperts.com>, Tiffany Sandberg <Tiffany.Sandberg@slcschools.org>, Rosemary Emery <rosemary.emery2@gmail.com>, Michael Clára <donmiguelslc@gmail.com>  
Cc: Janet Roberts <Janet.Roberts@slcschools.org>, McKell Withers <McKell.Withers@slcschools.org>, Jason Olsen <Jason.Olsen@slcschools.org>, "John E.S. Robson" <jrobson@fabianlaw.com>, Kristina Kindl <Kristina.Kindl@slcschools.org>

Dear Board Members,

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 additional independent and external feedback (performance audit) could be very helpful in meeting the board's expectations under the *Internal Communications and External Relations* essential of our 2010-2015 Student Achievement Plan. The scope of the work and the anticipated costs (less than \$50,000.00) would be determined if we moved forward. 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.

The RFP asked seven local PR firms to give a quick critique of the recent school lunch issue, explain their expertise and background in public relations, and provide some basic pricing information. The proposals were due to the purchasing department by Friday, February 14, 2014 and a committee reviewed the proposals and selected the best proposal to be considered for any future work on Tuesday, February 18, 2014. I am sorry that the whole board was not fully informed of this RFP and the reasoning behind it.

Sincerely,

Kristi Swett  
President  
Salt Lake City Board of Education  
Precinct 7