



HARRIS COUNTY  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

COPY

John Sawyer, Ed.D.  
County School Superintendent

October 30, 2007

Michael Wolfe  
7607 Deadwood Drive  
Houston, TX 77040

RE: Protocol

Mr. Michael Wolfe, I have always felt that a part of a Superintendent's role is to strive to assist each Trustee in being the "best that he or she can be" as a public representative. While I will not always agree with a Trustee, nor even the majority of the Board on some issues, I understand my role and have held true to this statement in trying to assist you in your role. I had assumed however, that you desired to work appropriately in the system.

I have, now, come to the point that I can no longer ignore your lack of cooperation on Board agreed protocol. I have sat in meetings with you and the rest of the Board in which these protocols have been reviewed. In fact, you have been the cause of at least one, and likely two, of those time-consuming meetings.

Please review the two attached memos to me before you proceed with the body of this correspondence. These items, which came to me in close proximity, precipitated this communication; however, they are not isolated concerns.

The first memo is from Ms. Celes Harris. With very little notice you have asked my staff to not just direct you (note that visitations are out of protocol without prior notification), but to accompany and drive you to various Head Start sites, an action which I facilitated for you on this last Monday after becoming aware of the request. Let me first state (as I have told you before) that staff do not work for the Board. They work for the Superintendent. I have final say over the routine of work and assignments. They are truly busy professionals, often with hectic, and too often with time critical, calendars. Recently, I not only emailed you, but had Vicky Smith contact you by phone, and then called you again to try to set-up a meeting with you, Mr. Garcia and me. I never received a response; yet reciprocally you have expected my staff to accommodate you ASAP. I facilitated two days, of the requested three, of visitation; however, no one's schedule could accommodate the third. Remember that they had pre-existing work routines to accommodate. I now find you have gone below my requested level of communication to set-up yet another round of visits, I have now approved it, but continue to be distressed at your ignoring our procedures. Please remember staff work for the Superintendent. The Superintendent works for the Board (corporate, not as individuals). While I note that you did contact one of my Executive Team (as I have requested) originally, even at this level staff was uncomfortable in dealing with a Board member's individual request.

As I have noted with other communications, it appeared not to be a "request;" but, an expectation. There seemed to be no recognition that staff might have conflicts. Mr. Morales noted similar behavior at the last Board meeting regarding a request that would/will take significant staff time (Please read "time" as meaning real money). These are professional level people with commensurate [I hope] salaries. Your personal agenda, which seems to ignore associated costs (e.g., lunch set-up at Massa's by you, without my knowledge, but on the Department's budget), is in conflict with your publicly proclaimed agenda to save taxpayers money. Do not read this statement wrongly:

- a) It is not illegal for the Department to pay for a working lunch; nor,
- b) do I object to a Board member, or the Board as a whole, eating at taxpayers' expense since your "job" is an unpaid (\$6 per meeting for those eligible cannot be considered much remuneration) service position.
- c) It seems to me that this is the least we can do to reward service when the opportunity avails itself.

The second attachment, from Ms. Venetia Peacock, is an even stronger depiction of your lack of concern for protocol. It depicts several examples:

- a) Communication regarding Department matters to *my* professional peers should come from me. I started to interject when you stated you had "lunched" with Dr. Saavadra and that you would call him. I know that the first part of your statement was a studied mischaracterization. I was somewhat confident that the likelihood of your getting a call through to Dr. Saavadra (a professional friend of some 25 years) was virtually nil.
- b) I was surprised to find, however, that you were directed to Dr. Karen Soehnge, another professional colleague and an assistant superintendent which is even farther from appropriate protocol for you. She, by the way, agrees.
- c) You misstated the facts and even the campus name in your original questioning. These misstatements caused several hours of work for the staff of both organizations, yielding yet another cost. Your call also "cashed in" some amount of our goodwill with HISD. You appeared, simply, to be uninformed and looking to embarrass them, or us. You do not represent the Department professionally. Your role is policy.
- d) I am told that on the visits I arranged for you, you passed out cards with your cell number advising staff to call you if they had any problems. Again, staff does not work for you. They, too, have protocol to follow. Calling a Board member directly about a professional problem puts them out of the chain of protocol, and compromises you as a Board member should any unresolved issues reach the Board for final determination. Please refrain from circumventing our organizational structure.

- e) A Board member should never invite staff to participate in a meeting without my permission, especially one in which other officials "outrank" them in organizational structure. Your request to have Ms. Peacock accompany you, without consulting with Ms. Harris or me, was out of order. This pattern was repeated with your latest visitation request.

There are other examples:

- a) I was greatly concerned by your behavior at our last Board meeting. Without prior notification, you suddenly exited our meeting, leaving us short of a quorum and with time sensitive business to complete. Another Board member, who was ill, had to be inconvenienced in order to re-establish a quorum, causing other Board members to wait for the better part of an hour to finish our agenda. Your action occurred after you had already delayed the meeting by forcing each consent agenda item to be handled separately. Any questions you had could, and should, have been handled by a phone call to me, or better yet a memo, prior to the meeting. Protocol would require prior notification of absence from a meeting or the need to leave a meeting early. These behaviors were demonstrated at this very meeting by Judge Schwartz, Ms. Chesnut and Mr. Morales. I am appalled at your lack of concern for the business of the Department, not to mention the lack of courtesy shown to other Board members.
- b) I am equally appalled by your lack of regard for the time restraints of your colleagues. You chose to lengthen the meeting prior to your departure by nullifying (without reason on several items) the efficiency of a consent agenda.
- c) You abstained several times during the meeting. Our *Operating Procedures* call for a statement as to why you are abstaining. Similarly they call for a statement of purpose for a "nay" vote. You continue to ignore this agreed procedure.
- d) Your actions and contact with the media have made our Department the subject of ridicule. Need I point out the Board's agreed protocol for handling press matters has been ignored?
- e) It is obvious that several of your recurring items of concern are personal agenda items with little relevance to, and no small distraction from, our core mission and goals. The rest of our Board, by supporting, did you a courtesy in my estimation to try to bond you to the "team." I more than just suspect that a revote (which has been suggested) would find that you have eroded whatever support you gained. I have personally counseled against any suggested re-vote simply because I see no reason for the Department to suffer further ridicule.

Michael, it is apparent to several of your colleagues, and me, that you neither accept nor understand that the role of our Board is public service. Despite several conversations I have observed with our Board, emphasizing that at our level partisan political endeavors only serve to cloud the issues of public service, you seemingly persist in ignoring most, if not all, protocols.

Please be aware that there are rules of governance, many of which are laws, or have the force of law. I do not, nor does our Board, wish to be put in the place of asking for enforcement. Please cease and desist from meddling in administrative matters. You are out of line. Your requests and actions are creating issues with my ability to schedule work, keep cordial relationships with some officials and districts, and are costing tax payers money.

Do not misunderstand this letter. While I am clearly not pleased by your actions, it is still my desire to see you become a productive member of our Board. I do not wish to stop communications between you and appropriate staff; however, I will regretfully become duty-bound to do so if I do not see some effort on your part to support our goals rather than play to political agendas. It is disheartening that you appear to have such a high degree of regard for other politicians (who seem to have limited knowledge of our services) that you would continue to undermine the efforts of our service-minded Board members, and staff.

Also, all of us expect the courtesy of timely, informative communication. On several occasions I have received no, or a much belated response to communication. I expect calls and other communications from my office to have an appropriate, timely response. I strive not to overburden our Board membership. I will not call for social discussion. *My* protocol is to air issues, first with our Board President, which I do; however, I try to keep all Board members informed and often this requires *two-way* communication. I do not like to see a Board member "surprised" however, your recent actions have led me to believe that you do not believe this courtesy to be reciprocal. Please help by not ignoring my attempts to communicate.

Finally, realize that I have no reason to want to alienate someone who evaluates my performance. On the other hand my *first obligation*, the job I was hired to do, is to further the best interests (to the extent of my ability) of the Harris County Department of Education. I take my profession and its charge seriously. I have thirty-seven years of experience in the educational environment. I am secure in my abilities and honest when I may be lacking. You have nine months experience. I am willing to work with you; but not to compromise my charge, nor *my* promise of service.

I will continue to try to accommodate you in your role. Outside of a duly called meeting of<sup>\*\*</sup> the Board, please cease and desist from interference in my role.

Please review Board protocols (Operating Procedures), enclosed.

Sincerely,



John E. Sawyer, Ed.D.  
County School Superintendent

Attachments

CC: Board of Trustees