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TODAY

My View

DUSD governing board tackles dress code

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Who should have the final say in how your children dress for school? Should it be the parents, school district, governing board or superintendent?

These questions are the basis behind an upcoming governing board agenda item, a proposal made by the governing board president, to change board policy JCA, student dress, for today's governing board meeting.

I have some concerns about the possible ramifications of these seemingly innocuous questions. Board president Charles Otterman's proposal would eliminate parents from this decision, take this decision out of the hands of the governing board (elected representatives) and hand this matter completely over to the school superintendent.

Mr. Otterman wants to delete the following paragraph from the current board policy JCA: "The Board will not interfere with the right of students and their parents to make decisions regarding their appearance except when their choices affect the educational program of the schools or the health and safety of others."

The current policy authorizes the superintendent to enforce regulations prohibiting (key word: prohibiting) student dress or grooming that is hazardous, interferes or disrupts, causes wear or damage to school property, prevents achievement, represents gang membership, obscene or references drugs. Mr. Otterman also wants to delete the reference to gang membership and damage.

I oppose Mr. Otterman's proposal to change the policy for a few reasons. I have performed extensive research into this topic and have come to one conclusion: There is no definitive empirical evidence showing benefit for, or disadvantage of, a dress or uni-

form code.

What truly disturbs me most is how this issue came about. It began with the creation of the students and parents handbook, approved by the board July 13, which included a "student dress code." PTO members and students requested the dress code be revised to accommodate "dress down and spirit days." The Uniform Advisory Team committee was reconvened to discuss this issue and made recommendations to the board Sept. 12. The matter was discussed and a few questions were raised for further research. The board did not take action.

However, on Sept. 21, I was provided, by someone inside the district, a copy of a district memo dated Sept. 19 instructing key principals to implement the uniform and dress team's dress code recommendations, "even if they were approved by the governing board. The governing board did not approve the recommendations."

I immediately communicated to the district the memo was in error and asked that it be retracted. Apparently the fact that I discovered (through someone inside the district) that the administration tried to implement dress code recommendations without board approval did not sit well with the superintendent, the administration nor Mr. Otterman. I believe this is why Mr. Otterman began the Oct. 5 board meeting by admonishing and chastising anyone who dared speak with a board member, and went on to call such people "cancers" and "watchdogs." The proclamation he issued that night was his and the district's attempt to muzzle anyone who dared bring up an issue that could paint a less-than-admirable picture of the district. The implication was the consequence of anyone speaking their mind, particularly to a concerned school board member, would be sure to suffer retribution, retaliation, or worse, the possible loss of their job.

When I asked Mr. Otterman and the district about the memo, others and I

became the target of their retaliation for exposing the district's circumventing of the board's authority.

Mr. Otterman emphatically states that the dress code, and the entire Students Rights and Responsibilities handbook, is nothing the board members — those elected to represent the parents, and stakeholders in this district — should be concerned with. He also says this issue should never have come before the governing board in the first place. However, I believe anything that directly impacts parents, taxpayers or other stakeholders in this district should indeed require governing board discussion and final approval.

Mr. Otterman labeled concerned individuals as "watchdogs." Let it be known that is an insult appropriate and will proudly wear the label on my name tag. After all, I have always seen myself as a watchdog for this school district, and especially so after being voted into office — to be a "watchdog" and to watch out for this district.

I was elected to serve the interests of the public. I will not allow the district, nor the governing board president, to muzzle, intimidate or threaten me or others who desire free and open communications as to health and well being of our public school district. I will not sit quietly and color in their coloring book. And I will not sit back in a dark, humid environment and be fed fertilizer only to appear to approve district's agenda recommendations.

If I learn such treatment has been inflicted against any teacher, staff member, administrator, parent or public stakeholder, I will take whatever measures are necessary to nullify and remedy such action, and to hold those who perpetrated such retributive actions accountable, with appropriate disciplinary actions to follow. Being a "premier" school district means freedom of expression, opinion and communication — the good, the bad and the ugly — without fear of retribution.

Letters

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