

COATESVILLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dr. Cathy L. Taschner
Superintendent of Schools

“Excellence in Education”

Changes to Restore Propriety and Trust in the Coatesville Area School District

December 15, 2014

Coatesville Area School District Superintendent Dr. Cathy Taschner has been working since she was appointed in June, 2014, to overhaul the district’s operating practices. Her focus has also been on dedicating much-needed resources to classrooms, and to ensuring the community’s input and concerns are heard. Since her appointment, the District has made many significant changes in its operations, policies, and procedures. Many of these changes address the recommendations made by the Chester County District Attorney, as well as by the law firm Conrad O’Brien, which conducted a year-long investigation into the administrative operations of the school district. Coatesville Area School District hired Conrad O’Brien to conduct that internal investigation, and it was used as a guide to help make operational improvements. A number of outside organizations, including the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, the Council for Equity in Education, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Chester County Intermediate Unit have also helped guide the Coatesville School District in making changes.

Many of the changes have been aimed at correcting/preventing further abuse and misuse of resources and authority. Some have been directed toward restoring propriety and trust. Others have been focused on student achievement and increased and improved communications.

What follows is a summary of changes as of mid-December, 2014. This list can be found on our website at: www.casdk12.org under the Moving Forward section under Quick Links. The District will continue to issue updates regularly as changes are made, and will continue to invite input from staff, parents, students, and the community.

- 1. Cash Collection/Deposit Policy** – The District has developed new clearly defined procedures and protocols for the handling, counting and depositing of cash. The process of counting and depositing now has additional controls such as cash receipts, verification by multiple people, detailed documentation, and a process for immediate deposit of money. Copies of all of this information is sent to and maintained by the business office. In addition, spot checks are being conducted to make sure that these procedures are properly followed.
- 2. Facility Rental** – The District has begun revising the facility-use policy that sets specific forms, fees, and guidelines for any organization wishing to use school facilities.

A master facilities list is also being used to track the use of facilities. All facility use requests are authorized by the school building principal where the event is to be held and by the District's facilities department. Any fees for use are sent directly to the business office for deposit.

- 3. Cellular Phones and Phone Plans** – The Superintendent conducted a surprise audit of all district-issued cell phones and asked the Chester County Intermediate Unit to audit those phones for inappropriate text messages. While there were no inappropriate text messages found on the phone, the Superintendent is eliminating text messaging on phones in order to eliminate the chance for inappropriate texting or communication. Each cell phone is equipped with calling ability and email capabilities, both of which provide meaningful opportunity to complete all needed school and business functions and can be easily recalled in instances where legal retrieval of the information could be necessary. The District is moving to a two-way radio system that would replace cell phones, potentially reducing the number of phones issued (and corresponding bills) from 87 to approximately 30 phones. In August, The Superintendent asked the Technology Director to create a system for cataloging and tracking all technology in the district, including cell phones.
- 4. Travel Reimbursement** – In September 2014 the Board approved the Superintendent's recommendation to suspended travel reimbursement for conferences and travel between buildings. Additionally, in November 2014 the Board approved a \$75 monthly cap on mileage for travel reimbursement for employees who are required to travel between buildings to complete their jobs. Employees who are required to travel are to use school issued vehicles whenever possible.
- 5. Personnel Audit** – The District is currently reviewing the certifications of all teachers and administrators in the district, and has transferred any who weren't teaching in their area of certification. In addition, Dr. Taschner has fired and/or has moved to fire several employees who were not fulfilling their job responsibilities, and had acted inappropriately.
- 6. Criminal Histories of Personnel** – Anyone who applies to the school district must be in compliance with Act 24 of 2011, which addresses background checks for school employees, requiring them to report prior arrests or convictions for any offenses listed in the school code.
- 7. School board policies** – The District has hired the Pennsylvania School Boards Association to help rewrite/realign policies, and all updates are listed on the district website under the "School Board" tab on the home page. The School Board openly discusses policy and revisions at the committee meetings of the Board, and invites public comment on those policies. In an effort to increase public input, the Board has also used the new website to survey the community members who may not be able to attend the meeting on specific policy changes.

- 8. Hiring Processes:** The processes for hiring teachers, support staff and administrators have been decentralized to ensure multiple people are involved and have input. This eliminates the chance that one administrator might have the authority to hire friends/family who may not be as qualified as other candidates. This new process mirrors those in the region's highest performing school districts, and helps eliminate cronyism, nepotism, and favoritism. It also helps ensure the most qualified candidates who are best-suited to the job openings are hired. Under the new procedures, a position guide is used to develop each job posting, a panel interviews each candidate and scores them, and in the case of administrators, focus groups are held with parents/staff/community members. Reference checks and writing samples are completed and scored, and background checks are carefully reviewed. While the superintendent makes the recommendation to the Board for the candidate to be hired, input of the direct supervisors carries a lot of weight in the process. The district passed a nepotism policy requiring School Board members to abstain from a vote and fill out a form if they are related to anyone being recommended to employment. In addition, interviewers are required to disclose if they are related to anyone who is to be hired. Coatesville Area School District has also moved to an online application system only, which ensures applications can't be lost and provides an electronic record of when they were received.
- 9. Competitive Bidding** – Employees are required to use the Chester County Intermediate Unit bid price for supplies and purchases, which has resulted in savings for the district. Custodian uniforms, video taping of the board meetings, translation services, and the radio system for school police use were all bid out since the arrival of the new Superintendent in June 2014, and resulted in savings for the district.
- 10. Audits of several district departments** – In August, the District replaced its auditors, who had missed many of the financial problems, and hired instead the accounting firm Maille, LLP, from Philadelphia (www.maille.com). They are conducting the annual financial audit on the District, covering all government funding and grants. Chambers Associates is auditing the District's building projects, the Chester County Intermediate Unit is auditing the District's technology department, and Conrad O'Brien completed a forensic audit as part of its investigative report. The Chester County IU is also completing a comprehensive technology audit that will be completed in December of 2014.
- 11. Hiring a new solicitor** – In October the District hired Levin Legal Group to replace former solicitor James Ellison. All fees and agreements with this law firm have been carefully reviewed and placed on the district's website. Mike Levin is known statewide for his highly-rated work with state educational associations and school boards.
- 12. Pursue compensation for cell phone and iPad bills from former solicitor James Ellison.** The School Board has passed a Resolution to pursue this matter legally.

13. The District has approved a resolution that issues intent to seek reimbursement from former superintendent Richard Como and former athletic director James Donato. The District intends to seek reimbursement of any funds allegedly misused, misappropriated or stolen during their tenure, as well as potential compensation for legal and other fees. The District will continue to work in this manner if it finds other instances in which improprieties have occurred.

14. Instituted Tip Line – Anonymous form on website (upper right corner) which allows anyone to issue an anonymous complaint. The information goes to the Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU), where a compliance office reviews the information and forwards it to the Superintendent. The CCIU continues to interface with the Superintendent (or Board, when appropriate) to ensure the matter has been addressed. In its first four months there have been just a few very minor complaints about a lack of resources and building level procedural issues in the schools, and these have been addressed.

15. Training for administrators – Administrators are going through training in safety and security, cultural sensitivity, trauma informed education, leadership, child abuse reporting, sexual harassment, prescription drug and alcohol abuse awareness, and conflict resolution. Training will continue throughout the year and will be expanded to include teachers and students.

16. Academic Improvements/Changes:

- a. Reduced class sizes.** During the months of June and July 2014, Dr. Taschner worked with the administrative team to complete a comprehensive staffing audit. Following the audit, staff was reallocated to allow for a reduction in class sizes across the District. While class sizes previously ranged anywhere from 27 to 33 students, and some classes had over 35 students in them, this year, elementary class sizes range from 18 to 24 students. There are only four classrooms that exceed the 25 student threshold and none of those four classrooms exceed a class size of 30.
- b. Reinstitution of World Language classes at the Middle School and the introduction of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) classes at the middle school level.**
- c. Obtained text books for students.** During June, July, and August 2014, the Superintendent worked with the administrative team to do a district-wide audit of textbooks. In instances where there were not enough books, used books were ordered and older books were rebound to ensure that students have appropriate resources. The District also reached out to surrounding Chester County school districts who donated books.
- d. Moved several administrators from District Office into school buildings.** One of the first moves the new Superintendent made was to commit resources to students and teachers, As such, Directors were moved out of the central office

building and put into school buildings where they could directly support principals, teachers, and students.

- e. **Superintendent making frequent rounds in classrooms to check in with teachers/building staff.** The superintendent has continued to spend as much time as possible in the schools, to meet with teachers, and to check on staff and student needs.
 - f. **Began partnership with community members to create a trained group of advocates who can attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings with parents to be a voice for families.** The District has partnered with a group of volunteers who are committed to the Coatesville Community. The group is now called Citizens Who S.E.E. (seek educational equality). The group provides trained people who can attend IEP meetings with families. This group has been welcomed by the Superintendent and has done an exemplary job of reaching out to others in the community.
- 17. Prioritize minority hiring** – This is an area that was neglected under the previous administration. Of the administrative team, about 27 percent qualify as being minority, and about 10 percent of the teaching staff qualifies. The district’s student population is about 31 percent African American, about 16 percent Hispanic, about 48 percent Caucasian, and about 5 percent falls into an “other” category. Dr. Taschner met with the Council for Equity in Education and has directed the human resources director to institute a plan that addresses minority recruitment, as well as to attend the Chester County Intermediate Unit’s minority recruitment fair and to work with the CCIU on this issue.
- 18. Cultural Sensitivity Training and Changes for the Entire District** – Coatesville is in the final stages of approving a joint plan with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission to address racial/cultural issues within the district. The plan is in response to the racial text messages that led to the former superintendent’s and athletic director’s resignation in 2013. The plan includes:
- a. Wide distribution and posting of the PA Human Relations Commission’s (PHRC) fair practices notices.
 - b. Improvements in communication to parents, staff and the community to promote transparency in decision-making.
 - c. Civil rights workshops and trainings for the board, staff and/or students.
 - d. Creating a diversity team of parents, staff, and community experts to guide the district’s equity efforts.
 - e. Administer and share results of a school climate survey for students and staff. This can be administered and tabulated by the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center at no cost.
 - f. Offer extra-curricular activities that appeal to students of diverse backgrounds and focus on multi-culturalism.
 - g. Foster strong community relations.

19. Improve Communications – Work to improve communications internally and externally and to work to restore trust and transparency.

- a. **Assigned the new Assistant Business Manager (hired in Sept. 2014) with filling Right to Know requests in a timely and appropriate manner.** Support is provided by the Levin Legal Group when required.
- b. **Revamped website.** Work on this continues. The website is updated weekly with the latest district events. In addition, the new website has been used for surveying the community on policy issues and will continue to be used as a communication tool for posting information in a timely manner.
- c. **Contracted with School Messenger,** a service that helps to improve the ease and reach of electronic and phone communications with staff and parents, translates messages into difference languages, and coordinates with the district’s food service and busing systems.
- d. **Superintendent issues frequent updates to staff and the community** about district changes in policies, procedures, and personnel.
- e. **Superintendent met with all local police chiefs** to develop a memo of understanding about improving communication with the school district. Each municipality law enforcement agency was given emergency access to the schools so that they are better equipped to assist the School District if needed.
- f. **District contracted with a school communications specialist** to provide support and manpower in improving communications, particularly with regards to media relations.
- g. **Improve communication with Spanish-speaking community.** The District makes every attempt to provide interpreters for the Spanish-speaking community at public meetings. The Language Line operated 24 hours a day and provides interpreters, allowing immediate support to families in multiple languages. The use of language line has created increased school to home communication for non English-speaking families.