

June 17, 2013

Superintendent Banda, Executive Director Campbell, and Principal Britsova:

The staff of The Center School has many grave concerns about the leadership of our principal, Oksana Britsova, which we have listed and explained below. While we recognize the enthusiasm she brings to her position, we must acknowledge that enthusiasm cannot overcome these shortcomings.

Early in the year, Ms. Britsova, in consultation with BLT, put improving staff climate as a C-SIP goal. The previous two years of district climate surveys had shown abysmal scores for her leadership (scores of 51% and 49% in contrast to the district scores of 75% and 66%). In response, BLT with Ms. Britsova's input, put together a staff meeting during which staff compiled markers of good leadership to present to Ms. Britsova to use as a roadmap for improvement. The creation of this list revealed deep dissatisfaction with her leadership. BLT presented this to the principal in November 2012. Instead of acknowledging problems, Ms. Britsova responded with a PowerPoint of her successes. This response clearly failed to address the issues involved with her poor leadership. In addition, the past six months have not shown improvement in the deficit areas identified; in fact, some areas have shown disimprovement.

Budget and Staffing

While Ms. Britsova has made the purchasing decisions of individual departments more transparent by allotting department budgets, overall, she has failed to demonstrate a clear ability to create a sound budget. Often she has appeared confused, unclear, or unprepared at meetings; some of her actions and decisions have created questions of fiscal competence. When asked about funding, budget, or other fiscal matters, she seems to shoot from the hip without checking on the veracity of the information.

Before 2012/2013, Ms. Britsova:

- Told BLT that we had been missing .2 in last year's budget, information that was shared with BLT only this year. She was unable to explain why such a hole existed even though BLT had carefully examined last year's budget before submitting it.
- Promised a staff member a position for this year; on the last day of school she rescinded this offer, telling the staff member that she was not qualified for it.
- Offered a staff member a position as Homework Club coordinator part way through the term but failed to provide her or her colleagues with requested information about budget, staffing and follow-through procedures that they required in order to make the program effective. As a result, they were forced to make ill-informed decisions, which undermined the success of the program.
- Provided Center School Community Association (CSCA) with vague and inaccurate information about certain funding items, thereby misleading them (e.g., the money they were allocating for a guitar class would fund a full year, when in fact it only funded one semester).

In the 2012/2013 school year, Ms. Britsova:

- Presented a budget to Building Leadership Team (BLT), claiming that everything was in order. This budget did not take into consideration, however, the increase in students projected for 11th grade. She stated that we should not base our decisions on numbers projections, for they are often wrong. BLT pointed out that all WSS funding allocations are based on projections, and we could not ignore them. This decision, if it had been allowed to stand, would have put 81 students in only two Humanities classes and in two Chemistry sections. Both are unfair and against the Collective Bargaining Agreement; the latter is unsafe.
- Developed the budget she initially presented to staff in isolation, not in conjunction with the BLT, the recommending group. In so doing, she was out of compliance with the school's decision-making matrix.
- Claimed suddenly during the staff presentation of the budget that funds were available that she had not previously revealed during the budget development process. This is one example of shooting from the hip when sharing information with staff on budget matters.
- Hired a teacher for one subject and then informed the teacher that she must take on a course in another subject area outside of her expertise. The teacher balked, Ms. Britsova insisted, and, as a result this mishandling, the teacher stepped down from a portion of the position mid-semester, leaving a long-term substitute to teach the class for the bulk of the year.
- Stated that the CSCA budget contained a line item to cover all-school attendance at a play at the Seattle Repertory Theatre. Based upon this statement, staff committed to attending this play, only to later discover that no such line item existed; as a result, the funds had to be taken out of the school's budget.

Other Procedures

Staff is very concerned about procedural integrity, especially around legal matters. This lack of integrity could set up the school and school district for legal ramifications.

Before 2012/2013, Ms. Britsova:

- Did not appear to understand the mandatory reporter and student safety rules, and, as a result, frequently called 911 to deal with non-emergencies.
- Because of parent pressure, twice transferred students from one class to another against the advice of teachers involved and sometimes without their knowledge. The teachers believed that neither transfer was in the best interest of the children because they both came near the end of the semester, causing disruptions in students' academic progress, in social environment, and in teachers' grading systems.

In the 2012/2013 school year, Ms. Britsova:

- Does not attend IEP meetings with regularity, even though her presence at them is required.
- Suspended an IEP student without following the correct procedure.

- Failed to follow the appropriate procedures connected with evaluation when putting teachers on support plans, performance improvement plans, and/or probations.
- Misrepresented to parent what SpEd math class was offered and moved a student with passing math grades into SpEd math class at parents' insistence. This decision does not give the student access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), the right of all special education students.
- Wrote an email reprimanding a teacher for discussing with colleagues an investigation undertaken by the district. This discussion took place behind closed doors after contracted time. More importantly, the investigation itself was over and the staff member was free to discuss it with those of his choosing. At a later staff meeting, she said that the teacher in question had misunderstood her email.
- Claimed to have followed procedures in Instructional Materials Complaint Procedure and then said that she had never seen the procedure form.
- Is frequently absent from school. While we realize the district has not provided funds or structure to cover these frequent absences, we also know that discipline and other issues that occur in her absence cannot be handled properly.

Relations with Staff

By the end of 2012, five staff members left TCS in part because of leadership, and eight members lodged complaints with Marni Campbell over Ms. Britsova's missteps. These complaints combined with issues that have arisen this year to create a profound sense of distrust.

Before 2012, Ms. Britsova:

- Created, in Science department meetings, a hostile, punitive, and unsupportive atmosphere. As a result, all of the teachers who helped TCS students to win top achievement awards in Science left the school because of Ms. Britsova's poor leadership.
- Intimidated staff members by threatening to place disciplinary letters in their files and by informing them that if they failed to follow certain procedures they could be sued and lose their houses.
- Berated and yelled at faculty members in meetings in an unprofessional manner. As a result, many lost trust in her.
- Interrupted teachers *while they were teaching their classes* to have them sign non-renewal of their contracts, inform them they were being RIFed, tell them she was putting letters in their files, or discuss other disciplinary actions.
- Interrupted teachers *while they were teaching their classes* to discuss non-time sensitive matters, even during student presentations.
- Did not appear to understand the subjects some teachers taught and became hostile and confrontational when faced with information from teachers that she did not appear to comprehend. In order to manage this hostility, some teachers took to dumbing down the curriculum they present to her, or trying to stay out of her way or "fly under the radar" to avoid attracting her attention.

In the 2012/2013 school year, Ms. Britsova:

- Has created a leadership vacuum: staff members turn to one another for leadership and support rather than to her, even in issues such as budgeting, staffing, meeting facilitation, day-to-day decision-making, discipline, and professional development.
- Fails to provide any sort of mentorship to new staff members, even those brand new to teaching.
- Signed SpEd teachers up for a math program on the suggestion from parents without consulting SpEd. Note that SpEd has other, better programs AND have already been trained in the program for which they have been enrolled.
- Has shown dishonesty and lack of integrity in many situations, creating a severe lack of trust among staff:
 - Claimed in a fact-finding portion of a Human Resource investigation that a staff member called her a liar and a poor leader, a statement that the staff member contradicts.
 - Told several staff member involved with organizing an assembly involving a race panel that she had cancelled the assembly; later she publicly contradicted herself and said that she had not cancelled it.
 - Told an investigator that she had counseled a teacher on changing a unit in order to be more sensitive to students; she had not so counseled the teacher.
 - Claimed at a staff meeting that she fully supported the teacher, when, in fact, the investigative report shows that she disagreed with his curricular choices.
- Refused to meet with staff when requested to discuss the implications and school-wide consequences many of us feared if a valued colleague and school leader were to be transferred. Staff then arrived, uninvited, at a BLT meeting to discuss what we were to do as a community if the transfer were to happen. Ms. Britsova characterized the possible move of this teacher as a Human Resource issue that she could not discuss. While we understand the need for privacy about the HR matter itself, we fear the consequences of this HR matter and need to be sure that these consequences are anticipated and planned for.
- When urged to challenge a decision made by the district, responded by saying, “They want to close us down anyway,” threatening that any form of dissent would lead to us needing to find new positions.

Relations with Students

Positive relations with students are a hallmark of strong leadership. While some students seek out Ms. Britsova for guidance, many are more wary. Ms. Britsova:

- Has not demonstrated cultural competence. Many students of color report that she treats them differently from the white students.
- Stated to students of color that the best way for them to deal with school issues is to assimilate into White culture, a suggestion that the students found objectionable. This came after a serious, racially charged incident at our school.
- Told staff not to have social networking relationships with students last year even though she friended students on Facebook, exchanging chatty messages with them until she was officially instructed to unfriend them. In response, she unfriended

- younger students, but remained friends with seniors on the grounds that they were about to graduate, even though they were still students at the school.
- Plays favorites, including giving gifts to certain students.

Summary

Although some staff members have had positive experiences with Ms. Britsova over the past three years, the majority of us now have serious concerns about her ability to lead The Center School effectively. Individual incidents can be explained away as misunderstandings or even mistakes that will be made by any leader. Collectively, however, the list has grown too long to ignore; individual incidents have now come together into a pattern that must be addressed. We feel so strongly about this issue that we find ourselves compelled to bring our complaints to her superiors in an effort to create change.

Resolution

Ms. Britsova clearly needs strong mentorship in order to lead the school properly and, as importantly, rebuild the damage that has been done to school climate. We need to see:

- An acknowledgment of the severity of problems that exist in the school;
- A pledge to respect the professionalism of teachers and their right to work without fear of threat or retaliation;
- A promise to work with teachers to repair the staff's broken trust with her, a trust that has been broken by the circumstances surrounding the high staff turnover in the last two years;
- A willingness to engage with staff in exploring and fixing our damaged school environment;
- A commitment to understanding and following school and district procedures in order to restore integrity to these procedures as they play out in our school;
- An assurance to provide transparency to staff and CSCA on budget and other financial matters;
- A sustained, visible presence at school events in order to support both teachers and students involved.

In order to achieve these, Ms. Britsova

- Should be placed on a Plan of Improvement that uses this document as its base;
- Should be given professional development on SPS procedures, Special Education law, fiscal proficiency, staff management, and cultural competence, each under the guidance of an expert in that area;
- Should be assigned a knowledgeable and skilled mentor who will guide her in her improvement. Our experience tells us that Marni Campbell cannot serve in this role. Many of the issues listed above have been raised with Ms. Campbell by staff, and she has not addressed them. If they had been addressed adequately, we would assume the same problems would not continue to arise;
- Should meet frequently with this mentor (weekly) although more frequent work may be needed at the beginning of the coming school year in order to begin the year well;

- Should meet and work with a staff committee—BLT, perhaps—on a regular basis in order to discuss milestones and receive staff feedback.

We ask that the district administration respond to this letter by August 1st with its decision to move forward on this matter and by September 15th with the details of the Plan of Improvement. At that point, representative staff members request a meeting to discuss those details. If you have questions or comments, please contact Gerardine Carroll, Nathan Chipps, and Molly Pritchard, who are the staff representatives.

If Ms. Britsova cannot agree to work to improve her performance or the district refuses to help Ms. Britsova develop a climate and working conditions conducive to good teaching and instruction, we ask that the district remove Ms. Britsova as principal from The Center School, and that the district start the hiring process for a new educational leader at our site.

Thank you.

19 of 22 members of the faculty of The Center School support the contents of this letter with 2 abstentions

cc: Glenn Bafia, Executive Director, Seattle Education Association
Jonathan Knapp, President, Seattle Education Association