

March 10, 2021

Open letter to the Citizens of Seminole County, our Teachers, staff and students:

When I started this journey in 2018, I created two hashtags: #mywhymykids and #mywhyourkids. I have given a lot of contemplation and reflection to the actions of this School Board over the past 30 days. I have reached the conclusion that, as a body, we have failed my kids, and we have failed your kids. Seminole County is the envy of the state when it comes to its educational operations and principles. At least we were. We created this mess, it is up to us to correct it. Robert Fulghum provided sage advice in his world famous "All I Really Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten": Play fair. Clean up your own mess. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

We have not heeded that advice, and the result is that we have not only failed our kids, but also our teachers, our parents, our stakeholders, and ourselves. We have brought disruption and dishonor into these chambers. Worse yet, where time and again our community has stood resilient to heated disputes with lines on race and gender, our actions as a body have brought our community, our constituents, our parents, our friends, and our teachers to a new brink of racial divide. We are supposed to lead by example; to teach our children to look beyond race, beyond gender and to reward hard work and the constant betterment of oneself in a chosen profession. Instead we have been regaled with our own members suggesting that a decision should be based, at least in part, on the basis of looks of the superintendent, and not the persons credentials.

I believe in equality; that is equality for all. Some on this dais seem to confuse the concepts of equality with the concept of preference. What was done in the selection of our superintendent was not equality, but preference.

We have come to find out that the existing superintendent overstepped his bounds in conversations with the search committee. Based on the reversal, it is possible he did the same with the Board. It is not helpful that he is taking Ms. Beamon around and introducing her as "his first choice" and the "one he wanted all along." These actions have put into question the legitimacy of the entire process. Worse, when I speak with teachers and staff, they share their opinions with me. Some are supporting of one candidate, others another. What the vast majority agree on is that they will not use their constitutional voice as individuals to share their knowledge, their perceptions, or their experience with a name and face attached to it, because of fear. Fear of losing their jobs, retaliation from peers, and even being labeled as a racist. It has become painfully obvious through this course of events.

I cannot speak for the other board members, only myself. For me, I publicly acknowledge that I failed you by allowing the verbal attacks against qualified candidates. I failed you by not interrupting and putting a stop to the negativity. I failed you by not calling out the atrocious behavior of my fellow members while it was occurring. My failing you stops now.

There is never a wrong time to do the right thing. Therefore, I will call out any behavior I feel is inappropriate and not something I want my kids or your kids to witness and learn from. In addition, I would ask that this board seek outside support to conduct a thorough investigation into what caused us to find ourselves in this position, and to include in that investigation a thorough review as to whether a hostile workplace has been created to cause the fear in our teachers and staff. Mostly, I would ask that we try to find common ground by listening to the people. Listening to hear, not to respond, and follow with actions that support the healing of our community.

I would further ask that the Governor direct the Attorney General to review the acts of this board and staff to ensure that no Sunshine Act violations occurred, and to determine whether we have acted in a way which is discriminatory against Mr. Farnsworth.

The most frequent comment we have heard is that to bring integrity back to the process we should start over and use an outside company. We need to listen to the public, our stakeholders. During this process, we somehow disregarded this very notion. I agree, we need to retain an outside independent company to start the process over.

We should count ourselves lucky if we aren't sued by one or both candidates. If we are sued, quite frankly, we deserve it as a consequence of our poor behavior.

I am proud to serve this community, so it is with humility that I ask your forgiveness and your support as I try to fix the mess my board created.

Sincerely,



Amy Pennock
Seminole County School Board Vice Chair