

April 25, 2021

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5624 Freret Street
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Advocates for Arts Based Education Board
Lusher Charter School
5624 Freret Street
New Orleans, LA 70115

Re: Follow up Regarding Grievance Filed on 12/8/21

Dear Members of the Advocates for Arts Based Education Board:

I am writing to follow up regarding the investigation that was conducted following a grievance I submitted to the board regarding the actions of Ms. Riedlinger on December 4th, 2020. On December 8th, 2020, I submitted an 11-page letter to this board that explained my concerns in great detail, which included documentary evidence and a timeline of events substantiating the matters raised in the grievance. When preparing the letter and supporting information, I took great pains to provide a detailed description of the troubling events leading up to the submission of my grievance so that the AABE Board would have the information necessary to conduct a thorough and fair investigation.

After I submitted my December 8th correspondence explaining my concerns, I was informed by AABE attorneys that an investigation would be conducted and, upon its conclusion, I would meet with the board in executive session of a special meeting. At the request of the AABE attorneys, I provided additional information supporting the contentions outlined in my 11-page grievance letter, including emails, call logs, and text messages. I also participated in a lengthy interview with the attorneys that lasted approximately six hours and included extensive questioning about the actions raised in my grievance letter and other issues that apparently arose during their interviews with other Lusher staff.

At the conclusion of the investigation, I was informed by the AABE board's attorneys that Ms. Riedlinger would not be subject to any disciplinary action or other consequences despite the overwhelming amount of evidence demonstrating the impropriety of her conduct. Thus, no action was taken against Ms. Riedlinger notwithstanding the following: (1) a Lusher staff member chose to offer his resignation rather than follow Ms. Riedlinger's directive to alter facts, (2) the written documentation that I submitted in my grievance letter and throughout the investigation corroborating the concerns that I had raised, and (3) Ms. Riedlinger's active interference with the investigation conducted by the Board's attorneys (discussed further below). Beyond that, the correspondence to me from the school's attorney curiously stated that "At this time, we are not recommending disciplinary action against *either* party". Given that no complaint or grievance was ever filed against me, I was quite surprised at this language because it appears to suggest that there was some consideration of disciplinary action against me despite the fact that I was not accused of any wrongdoing (unlike Ms. Riedlinger). I was also never afforded the opportunity to meet with the AABE Board in executive session, as initially promised per the procedures of the grievance process and after my subsequent request to do so.

The AABE board's decision to take no action in response to the concerns expressed by me and others is, to say the least, very disappointing. Although I am disappointed with the board's decision, the issues I raised are still impacting this community and therefore I believe it necessary to provide the board with further information.

As part of the grievance process, Ms. Riedlinger was afforded the opportunity to write a rebuttal in response to my letter and that rebuttal was provided to the school's attorneys and presumably the AABE board. In her rebuttal, Ms. Riedlinger continued to make demonstrably

false statements to try and defend her actions. While I was not provided a copy of the rebuttal, I was afforded the opportunity to read it, and I specifically recall at least three instances where Ms. Riedlinger unequivocally lied to the attorneys and the AABE Board. While I certainly recognize that an individual should be given the opportunity to defend oneself against a grievance and offer his or her perspective, it is never appropriate for anyone – particularly someone serving in a position of trust like Ms. Riedlinger – to make deliberately untrue statements and attempt to obscure their own wrongdoing. As I stated to the board president during our phone call at the conclusion of the investigation, Ms. Riedlinger has affirmatively made untrue statements to the AABE board and continues to do so. Regrettably, Ms. Riedlinger’s decision to conduct herself in this manner has compromised the ethics and integrity of our organization. I have provided three non-exclusive examples in which Ms. Riedlinger has made misrepresentations to the Board:

- First, Ms. Riedlinger claimed that she verbally discussed with me the email that I had sent to her on September 29th, initially outlining my concerns regarding her response, or lack thereof, to calls for racial equity in our school, and her retaliatory actions towards me. Contrary to Ms. Riedlinger’s claim, we have never spoken about this email verbally or in writing – and she is well aware of this. It is incredibly troubling that Ms. Riedlinger represented to the board (in writing no less) that we discussed these issues when no such conversation has ever occurred.
- Second, Ms. Riedlinger claimed that I had told her “I am an anti-racist, and I will do whatever it takes.”. Of course, I abhor racism, but I have never once presented that view in the manner in which Ms. Riedlinger has described – to her or to anyone else. Ms. Riedlinger’s attempt to create a false narrative about me by attributing a statement to me that I never once said – and to represent it as true in her written communications to the board – is unacceptable and extremely concerning.
- Third, Ms. Riedlinger claimed that cancelling the High School Student of the Year process (which is only offered to students who earn the school’s highest award, Lusher Scholar), was not in any way related to the fact that most of the students who were offered this award declined to accept it because it was named after an unapologetic segregationist. When I described how inconceivable this argument was to the attorneys, based on the evidence presented, one of the attorneys actually stated, “yeah, she’s lying.” Because my interviews were recorded and transcribed, there must be a record of the attorney’s acknowledgment that Ms. Riedlinger was intentionally making untrue statements during the investigation. The attorney’s candid acknowledgment is notable, and it corroborates the concerns I have expressed regarding the veracity of Ms. Riedlinger’s representations.

As evidenced by the above examples, Ms. Riedlinger continues to deflect responsibility and make demonstrably untrue statements to the AABE Board in an effort to conceal her inappropriate actions. She has fabricated events that never occurred and fed them directly to this board without any hesitation. Let me also remind you that on July 1st, 2020, Ms. Riedlinger called me and falsely claimed that one of you, an AABE board member had called her with concern that I had retweeted a CNN video of Mitch Landrieu discussing the confederate symbolism of Mississippi’s state flag. She revoked this claim, only after I had requested that same day for her to provide me with the name of the board member who had raised this concern so that I could reach out to the person directly. While I have been able to provide dozens of supporting documents confirming her misleading conduct, Ms. Riedlinger cannot provide anything to the contrary and, to my knowledge, has not submitted any such information. Despite Ms. Riedlinger’s multiple affirmative misrepresentations, it appears that all of her assertions have been accepted as true – even though the school’s own attorney stated definitively, “yeah, she’s lying” during the investigation.

In addition to Ms. Riedlinger’s continued habit of making untrue representations, it also must be emphasized she knowingly and intentionally interfered with the investigation of my grievance as it was being conducted. Just days after one of my staff members was interviewed by the school’s attorneys, Ms. Riedlinger contacted the employee via text message stating, “I can’t believe you did this to me” followed by a broken heart emoji. The employee contacted the school’s attorneys the next day and shared this information with them. Given this, the school’s attorneys not only believed that Ms. Riedlinger had lied to them but also were well aware that she had abused her position of power and attempted to interfere with the investigation, in direct

contradiction to the instructions provided by the attorneys to her and me. Notwithstanding Ms. Riedlinger's blatant disregard for the investigation process – and her defiance of the specific instructions given by the school's attorneys – she also faced no consequences for these inexplicable actions.

This is incredibly troubling as, based on her past actions and continued behavior, Ms. Riedlinger will continue to manufacture falsehoods (whether about me or to defend her own improper conduct) without consequence. I therefore have determined that I must proactively raise this to the board as I remain deeply concerned that Ms. Riedlinger likely will continue to construct additional fabrications about me that would cause irreparable damage my career and reputation (as well as the reputation of our students and school community). On this point, I wish to remind the board that at no time in my career, at any level, have my ethics or morals ever been questioned. I have always been, and remain, a person of high ethics and integrity, which is the primary reason I feel compelled to bring these issues to the board's attention again.

Unfortunately, I have lost all faith in Ms. Riedlinger's ability to be truthful or conduct herself in an ethical manner. The fact that the board has taken no action against Ms. Riedlinger will only serve to embolden her and encourage her to continue the same inappropriate and retaliatory conduct that she has displayed in the past. The allowance of these behaviors opens up significant risk for our organization and makes it incredibly difficult to hold my staff to the ethical standards that they should be required to meet. If Ms. Riedlinger is permitted to engage in wholly improper conduct without any repercussions, it effectively ties my hands and precludes me from reprimanding or terminating any employee on my staff for similar conduct.

As noted above, during the investigation I was interviewed twice, for approximately six hours in total. During these interviews I was asked numerous questions about Ms. Riedlinger's conduct as it related to issues of race. The questions that were raised regarding issues of race were initiated by the school's attorneys. Due to the questioning, prior incidents regarding Ms. Riedlinger regarding race surfaced. I responded truthfully to each of these questions. At the conclusion of the investigation, I asked the school's attorneys if they were going to share the information that was provided to them regarding issues of race involving Ms. Riedlinger with the AABE board, as these were not outlined in my letter. The attorneys shared with me that they had, in fact, provided this information to the AABE Board of Directors, and that it would then be up to the board to determine how they would proceed. It was important to me that these incidents be shared with the AABE board, and the school's attorneys confirmed that they had shared them. I am aware that other staff members raised similar concerns during the investigation, and believe that these incidents provide additional context as it relates to the current situation our organization has found itself in. Please note that I have also kept records of these incidents dating back prior to the grievance that was filed. Some (but not all) of the incidents that I shared with the school's attorneys during the investigation include the following:

- On at least three occasions Ms. Riedlinger spoke to me about her concerns regarding the diversity of our high school cheerleading team. Our cheerleading team has been approximately 90% Black during my time at Lusher. She expressed concerns regarding the racial composition of our cheerleading team, including that white cheerleaders on the team were not placed in the front or middle of formations. Ms. Riedlinger also asked coaches for rosters during tryouts and inserted herself into the tryout process. At no point has Ms. Riedlinger ever raised concerns to me about the racial composition of any other sports team aside from the predominantly black cheerleading team, even though we have many teams that are comprised overwhelmingly of white students.
- During the 2019-20 school year, I met with Ms. Riedlinger to discuss my desire to allow students to vote directly for homecoming court. The current process allows students to nominate classmates but relies on a committee of staff members who ultimately choose the court. The high school homecoming committee is made up of staff members that are appointed by Ms. Riedlinger. During our conversation, Ms. Riedlinger attempted to defend the process and specifically noted that one of the reasons it remains in effect is because Black students use "block voting" to get certain students nominated.
- At the beginning of the strategic planning process, families, students, and staff were all surveyed to provide their thoughts on the strategic future of our schools. After the survey was completed, school administrators, including myself, were given the opportunity to

read over the full responses. It was explained to us that while we would be able to view this information in full, the themes of the survey would be condensed when made available to the public. We were invited to view the hard copy responses but asked to return them following our reading. Administrators were told that there were a number of responses that were “blacked out” with marker because they identified information about staff members that may not be appropriate to share. However, when reviewing the document, one could clearly see the text behind the marker ink. While there were some comments blacked out that were related to individuals, other comments were also blacked out that were directly related to either issues of race or community members’ concern with the name of our school. Despite the fact that members of our community were asked to provide comments as part of our process to develop a strategic plan, these specific comments regarding racial concerns were removed entirely. No other comments regarding any other topic were blacked out.

- During a homecoming football game, Ms. Riedlinger first learned of the high school’s Black Student Union after members of the court were introduced and their affiliate clubs were announced. Ms. Riedlinger questioned me on the spot about the club, and the next day met with me about her concerns that a Black Student Union was established at the school. Ms. Riedlinger has never raised concerns to me about any other clubs in our school, which include clubs associated with other racial and/or ethnic groups, political groups, or religious affiliations, among others.

In addition to the incidents stated above, I’d like to remind the board of Ms. Riedlinger’s actions following calls for racial equity from members of our school community. Each of these actions and concerns were outlined in my initial letter to the board and corroborated with dozens of artifacts. The initial letter is attached once again.

I have handled this unfortunate situation professionally at every step. As stated in my initial letter to the board, I take no joy in sharing this information. I do want to reiterate that I remain deeply concerned that Ms. Riedlinger will likely continue to construct additional fabrications about me that could damage my reputation, and further damage the reputation of our school community beyond what has already occurred. While I am not responsible for these incidents, given my role and obligation to my students, staff, and community, I recognize that I must bring these issues to the attention of the people who are, in fact, the most responsible for the best interests of our school community. Additionally, as Ms. Riedlinger was afforded the courtesy of not providing me a copy of her rebuttal, I am requesting the same courtesy as it relates to this letter.

It is my sincere hope that the AABE board takes seriously the information that I and others have provided, considers the impact that these actions have had on our community, and finds the courage to do what is in the best interest of our organization.

Sincerely,

Dr. Steven Corbett
High School Principal
Lusher Charter School