

December 8, 2020

Dr. Steven Corbett
High School Principal
Lusher Charter School
5624 Freret Street
New Orleans, LA 70115
Steven_corbett@lusherschool.org

████████████████████
████████████████████

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

Re: Concerns about Lusher’s Commitment to Racial Equality, Lusher’s Response to These Concerns, and Incident with CEO Kathy Riedlinger on 12/4/2020

Dear Members of the Advocates for Arts Based Education Board:

At the outset, I wish to emphasize that I do not take any pleasure in writing this letter to express my concerns (and the concerns of others) regarding a variety of events and circumstances that have been occurring at Lusher Charter School (“Lusher”) over the last six months. However, I feel compelled to bring to the Board’s attention these matters as I believe that they are having a detrimental impact on our students, our faculty, and – most importantly – the learning and work environment at Lusher (for both students and faculty). This letter will outline several specific instances of improper conduct and interactions that I have witnessed in recent months. While lengthy, I ask that you read this letter in its entirety given the importance of the issues that I feel compelled to bring to the Board’s attention not only because they involve me,¹ but also because they will greatly impact Lusher’s future going forward.

THE COUNTRY’S RENEWED FOCUS ON RACIAL INJUSTICE

Many of the issues and concerns discussed herein have had a profound impact on our students, faculty, and staff, as well as me personally. As we all witnessed, this summer marked a period of racial reckoning across our nation. Protests emerged, and there were calls for both individuals and organizations to take all possible steps to combat issues of systemic racism, to better themselves, and to better their communities. Our school was no stranger to these calls for action.

Beginning on or around June 11, 2020, Lusher began receiving emails and letters regarding the name of our school and its origins. A petition was started, and demands were made to improve racial equity at Lusher. On July 4th, 2020, hundreds of students, staff, and community members marched on our school to raise awareness of issues, including the underrepresentation of black students and staff, discriminatory practices, lack of diversity training, persistent microaggressions, the need for minority supports systems, and the fact that our school is named after an unapologetic segregationist.

From the beginning, I have expressed concern for the approach we have taken in response to the racial awakenings occurring across the country and in our own school community. I believe that our responses have lacked urgency, and at times, authenticity. I also believe that we failed to engage in meaningful dialogue with our school community and failed to partner with them on these incredibly important issues. I have expressed these concerns on

¹ As you will see, towards the end of this letter I will specifically address an incident occurring on December 4th, 2020, involving CEO Kathy Riedlinger. A formal grievance procedure does not exist within our organization; therefore, I informed the AABE Board. Before detailing the incident that occurred. I believe it is important to outline many of the related actions that have taken place in the months prior to the December 4th encounter with Ms. Riedlinger.

dozens of occasions, both directly to CEO Kathy Riedlinger and to our entire senior leadership team. I have been frustrated and disappointed in the responses I have received. Although I hoped for a different outcome, it shortly became evident to me that these responses would not contribute to the healing of our community, but instead would likely create additional division.

As community members raised concerns, some of them communicated to me that they had never received a reply from Lusher responding to them. When members of our K-12 community detailed that they would march on our school in a peaceful protest on July 4th, I explained along with others that it was critical for Lusher to make clear to the community that it would be at the forefront of addressing these calls for racial justice. Despite my attempts to have Lusher affirmatively address these issues even before the July 4 march occurred, at the time no such actions were taken. And while eventually our school communicated with our stakeholders about ways in which we would address these issues, I strongly believe that the proposed “solutions” came across as halfhearted and indifferent, and never truly addressed the concerns of many in the community, especially our students.

MS. RIEDLINGER DECLINES TO ADDRESS THE RACIAL-JUSTICE ISSUES RAISED BY FACULTY AND STUDENTS BY UNDERMINING THEIR EFFORTS

As public communications began going out, there were other actions taking place behind the scenes that further compromised our efforts to become a stronger community partner in addressing issues of racial equity. I have found myself in the unfortunate position of having to address many of these concerning circumstances given my duties and obligations to Lusher and I have provided below (some of which you may not be aware) a non-exhaustive list of several troubling incidents that have occurred over the last six months.

- On 6/12/2020, members of the K-12 Diversity Pathway team met with all administrators, including Ms. Riedlinger, to discuss proactive steps to address issues of diversity within Lusher following the death of George Floyd. Ms. Riedlinger advised the administrators that this was a listening session, and that we were not to engage in any dialogue.
- On 6/25/2020, the Diversity Pathway team again met with school administration and Dr. Anna Long from LSU to proactively discuss issues of diversity with all administrators.
- In July, Ms. Riedlinger informed me that two members of the Diversity Pathway team, middle-school teachers [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], reached out to her for a meeting to discuss issues related to racial equity, however Ms. Riedlinger advised me that she would not meet with them because she did not “trust them”.
- On 7/1/2020, Ms. Riedlinger called me, stating that a Board member reached out to her and asked why I retweeted a CNN video of former Mayor Mitch Landrieu discussing the confederate symbolism of Mississippi’s state flag. Later that day on a call, I questioned the rationale of the unnamed board member to which Ms. Riedlinger then explained that a board member did *not* in fact ask about it, but if one were to ask, she wanted to know what to say to them in response. The text of the CNN tweet² is cut and pasted below, which clearly demonstrates that there was nothing controversial about the tweet:

² The full video is available at: <https://twitter.com/CNN/status/1277838022306861066?s=20>



- Based on her previous comments and actions outlined above, it was clear to me that Ms. Riedlinger was trying to portray me as an “instigator” behind the racial-justice demonstrations rather than a problem-solver. Given this, I suppose that I should not have been surprised when, on 7/24, Ms. Riedlinger asked me to send her a written communication (which she said would be provided to the school’s attorneys) stating that I had not been in contact with the Black Student Union regarding the July 4th protest. Just five days later, she asked me to send additional information, essentially stating the same for the attorneys. I therefore responded in part:
 - *“As stated before, I have had no written or verbal correspondence with anyone on behalf of the BSU regarding the recent actions or requests that they have made. I am aware that they facilitated a march on July 4th in which they stated concerns and desired actions, however I was not present for that event. The BSU also did not communicate with me regarding their desire to sponsor that event. The only other correspondence I have received regarding action items or requests from the BSU came in the form of an email on July 28th to the Board President, in which an agenda was attached outlining certain desires. I was copied on that email by the Board President.”*
- Ms. Riedlinger called me numerous times in July and August, stating that “people” were saying I was “behind all of this” and that I know “who is behind this”, and she “better not find out” that I haven’t told her information.
- In August, Ms. Riedlinger instructed the entire administrative team to stop speaking with the Anti-Defamation League (“ADL”) until further notice. (Discussions have since resumed);
- In August, Ms. Riedlinger instructed me to no longer speak to our ADL representative Melissa Licali, Education Director of ADL South Central. This instruction was perplexing to me as Melissa has worked with Lusher for the past five years and helped build our ADL peer Facilitator program. That request remains in effect.
- In August, Ms. Riedlinger instructed me to cancel a staff book club, studying the book *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo. As a result, the next session was postponed. On the morning of the club’s following session, I called Ms. Riedlinger and asked her how she wanted me to explain to our staff its cancellation. She responded, “I’m not taking responsibility for this”. The book club continued.
- After being asked to work the month of July due to COVID-19 related needs, time sheets were submitted by all administrators. In August, Ms. Riedlinger called me and told me she would not be paying HS Assistant Principal ██████████ for anything she worked on

related to diversity. I then had to pass on Ms. Riedlinger's directive to [REDACTED] to remove any summer hours dedicated to diversity work.

- On 8/5 Ms. Riedlinger sent me a screenshot from the Facebook page of the High School [REDACTED] Sponsor, [REDACTED]. The screenshot showed a post that expressed frustration with our elementary school [REDACTED]. Ms. Riedlinger called me and discussed the post, and the next day called again and asked if I had written a disciplinary letter for her HR file. I told Ms. Riedlinger I needed to speak to our attorneys as I wanted more guidance on whether or not we could discipline her for the post and to discuss which policy the employee violated. She told me she would set up a call. The call with attorneys never occurred, and we never spoke about the incident again.
- In September, High School Assistant Principal [REDACTED] was removed as our ADL liaison. No reason was given.
- On 9/23, the first meeting was scheduled between Ms. Riedlinger and the BSU [REDACTED] which was initiated by the BSU [REDACTED]. Ms. Riedlinger initially agreed to the meeting, then cancelled the following day.
- On 9/24, students engaged in a silent protest at school. Ms. Riedlinger and I communicated via email which read in part:
 - *“Kathy, I reached out to [REDACTED] at your request. She stated to me that the students have concerns they feel have not been addressed at the K-12 level. They have had productive conversations with me regarding HS initiatives, but the larger concerns they have are K-12 in nature. They are aware that I cannot address these larger K-12 issues. [REDACTED] stated that this is why [REDACTED] reached out to you directly.”*
 - Ms. Riedlinger responded in part: *“Thanks, Steve. Would you please tell me what K-12 concerns you cannot address.”*
 - I responded to her email with the following: *“I can speak of K-12 items that have surfaced, but I am not the decision maker as it relates to these larger items. They know this. They would like to speak with you as the issues they have raised involve all three schools.”*
- On 9/25 Ms. Riedlinger called me, stating to me that she was going to hold me “personally responsible” for the actions of the students. This was the second time Ms. Riedlinger told me that I would be held “personally responsible” for the actions of our students even though she had yet to engage in any discussions with them.
- On 9/28 Ms. Riedlinger told me that moving forward, all of my communication to parents and students must be approved by her first. After sending weekly emails to our community for the past three years, I now require her approval before sending out anything. This unexplained and substantial deviation from prior practice further demonstrated to me that Ms. Riedlinger was diminishing my role and taking adverse action against me for no legitimate reason.
- On 9/29 I sent an email to Ms. Riedlinger addressing concerns that I had regarding our response to calls for racial equity, and the treatment I had received from her over the past three months. (That email is included below in its entirety).
- On 10/26, following an email request made to teachers by the BSU [REDACTED], asking them to discuss racial equity issues in class, I spoke with Ms. Riedlinger on the phone and urged her to meet with the [REDACTED]. On 10/26, three and a half months following the July 4th protest, Ms. Riedlinger met with the BSU [REDACTED] for the first time.
- On 11/30, Ms. Riedlinger requested that I send her all of our plans related to ADL and our Advisory program. I provided those plans. On 12/1 she called me and told me she did not understand how one of our advisory groups was reading the book *Stamped*, by Ibram

X. Kendi, and why I approved this. *Stamped* tells the history of how racist ideas are created, spread, and deeply rooted in American Society. The book was the recipient of the 2016 National Book Award for Non-Fiction. She also expressed concern that we provided our teachers with a resource library of anti-racist literature. She directed me to no longer approve the use of any anti-racist materials moving forward.

Due to many of the concerns listed above, as well as concern for the treatment I was receiving by Ms. Riedlinger, I reached out directly to her via email on 9/29/20 to express said concerns. The email I sent to Ms. Riedlinger is below, in full. Even though it has been nearly 2 ½ months, Ms. Riedlinger has yet to respond to the below email or discuss these issues with me.

Kathy,

I am writing to express some concerns that I have regarding our response to calls for racial equity at Lusher, and the treatment I have received over the last three months because of it. I have expressed my concerns directly to you and the larger administrative team on several occasions. I have pushed back respectfully, challenged our group to be more responsive, asked us to move more urgently, asked us to provide actionable steps to promote greater racial equity in our school, and to listen to the voices of our Black students. More than three months have passed since concerns have been brought to our administration, and we have yet to engage our entire community in a dialogue meaningful to them on this matter.

Since the murder of George Floyd, our community has called on us to become better. They've asked us to look at current policies, address existing issues, and build a stronger community. Hundreds of community members, including students, staff, and families marched on our school. Thousands of people signed an online petition to change the school's name. Dozens of stories have been shared regarding student experiences, emails have poured in questioning our efforts, news outlets have repeatedly run stories and asked for comment, and our PTSA and Board meetings are now forums in which these concerns continue to be shared. On Friday, an overwhelming number of students participated in a silent protest to mimic the experience our Black students have felt. They stated that "This action is in response to the lack of acknowledgement from LCS administrators to concerns and demands brought to light by BIPOC students. My voice matters. I am remaining silent and invisible to imitate how BIPOC students have continuously been made to feel."

Just this morning, our [REDACTED] collectively asked us to no longer use their names or images in promotional materials, in solidarity with their Black classmates. The repeated emails from students and parents, messages, requests, and additional actions are direct reflections of their perceptions of our response and their dissatisfaction with it. With students and staff returning in two weeks, I do not feel our staff, teachers or community are adequately prepared for the in-person dialogue that will soon be needed to move toward a greater understanding & response to their needs.

When these issues were first raised, I often found myself to be the lone voice in the room dissenting on our approach. I found myself engaged weekly, if not daily, in difficult conversations with you. I stated clearly and repeatedly that I wanted what was best for our community but felt that our response was not sufficient in many areas. This was never malicious or an attack on you, though since this, you have made claims that some have suggested that I have been "behind all of this". Definitely, I am not. You stated to me that you know when I "go off the rails". You have stated to me that I "know who is behind this", and that I "better not find out" that I haven't told you information. You told me that a board member needed an explanation as to why I retweeted a post by Mitch Landrieu, discussing the symbolism of Mississippi's confederate state flag. Later you told me a board member did not surface this, but if one did you wanted to know how to respond. Twice you told me that you are "holding me personally responsible" for the actions of our students.

I'm disappointed in how I'm being perceived. I cannot believe we're in the situation we are today. I'm also discouraged by the path that we've chosen to take in addressing issues of race and equity in our school. It is important for me to state once again that my only desire is to support our school and community, in particular our Black students. I've tried very hard to do that, albeit with little to no success.

Our students and teachers are disappointed. Many families have expressed similar sentiments. I hope you understand that I am writing this because I care deeply for our school community. I hope you understand the frustration I am dealing with throughout this process as I do feel my hands are tied and voice is silenced. I do believe there are issues of racial equity in our school that we should address. That does not mean I discount the history of Lusher and what it's done for numerous students and families, including my own. I believe we need to take these issues more seriously, and I believe we need to prioritize this situation in an authentic way to help heal our community. I am more than happy to walk alongside you in this effort, but once again believe we need to change our approach as the dissatisfaction in our response is evident from many stakeholders.

*Best,
Steve Corbett, Ed.D.
High School Principal*

THE LUSHER COMMUNITY'S EFFORTS TO COMBAT AND PROTEST ISSUES CONCERNING RACIAL INJUSTICE

Over the past six months, our community of students, families, and teachers has asked us to be better. They have written countless communications asking for us to engage in meaningful dialogue and participated in various forms of protest. Since the July 4th march, and after our response to their concerns, the following actions have been taken by members of our community:

- On 9/25/20 middle school and high school students, and many staff, participated in the “Black Students Matter Day of Silence”, turning off their cameras for virtual instruction and remaining silent. I am not aware if any elementary school students participated. Students wrote in the Google Meet/Zoom chat boxes the following:
 - *“Today, I am participating in the Black Students Matter Day of Silence. My screen will be blacked out and muted for the duration of the school day. This action is in response to the lack of acknowledgement from LCS administrators to concerns and demands brought to light by BIPOC students. My voice matters. I am remaining silent and invisible to imitate how BIPOC students have continuously been made to feel.”*
- On 9/29/20 all ██████████ asked us to no longer use their names or images in any promotional materials, in solidarity with their BIPOC classmates. Their email to Ms. Riedlinger in part, is as follows:
 - *“We love the education we have access to and are so grateful for everything you and the administration have done to make this school a productive and nurturing learning environment for us. Unfortunately, many of our classmates have not felt as welcomed and appreciated as we do, and that is largely due to the lack of awareness of racially biased practices inside and outside the classroom. Despite often feeling as if they don't belong, our BIPOC classmates have not stopped following the Project Pride rules, and they consistently live up to the LCS standards in arts, athletics, and academics. All of our successes have been impacted by our BIPOC classmates, teachers, mentors, and teammates who constantly push us to do our best work. Because we wish to support the BIPOC LCS community as they have always supported us, we do not want our titles as ██████████ to be used by the school any longer, whether that be in tweets, newsletters, promotional materials, or on the school website. As long as we feel that the administration is not working sufficiently towards the demands*

drawn up by the Black Student Union, we have no desire for our personal achievements to be used or broadcasted by the school as they have been in the past. We will attach the most recent list of demands.”

- On 10/2/20 The [REDACTED] Coach, and I received an email from a member of the [REDACTED]. The email is as follows:
 - *Good afternoon! I just wanted to let Coach [REDACTED], Coach [REDACTED], and Dr. Corbett know about a discussion the [REDACTED] had about our upcoming season. After a student-led meeting to discuss how the [REDACTED] team is going to support the Black Student Union this upcoming season, we have decided that we do not want to wear jerseys that say “Lusher” on them. As you know by now, our school was named after a white supremacist, and we do not want our team to support that. So, the team has decided to buy new jerseys that say LCS on them. Our plan is for each student to buy their own and for the team to fundraise in order to lower the price of those new jerseys. We are also discussing further initiatives like getting “Black Students Matter” gameday armbands to support the BSU. For now, we will not be acting on those ideas as our primary initiative is to get new jerseys. Thank you for understanding the importance of this matter, The [REDACTED]*
 - Ultimately, the [REDACTED] team has decided to wear black arm bands with the initials, “BLM”, for Black Lives Matter. They continue to wear these armbands in each game they play. In their game on 12/9/20, they will start eleven Black student athletes as a show of solidarity, and participate in a short demonstration with the opposing team
- On 10/23/20 on the final day of Mini-Spirit Week, students were asked to wear attire to show their school pride. Many students and staff wore Lusher attire but did so with the name crossed out. Others wore T-shirts with a play on words related to Project Pride, with sayings like “Don’t Be Kind-a Racist” and “Respect All People and Property”.
- On 10/26/20 the BSU [REDACTED] asked some teachers to support a “Day of Uncomfortable Conversations”. She stated the following:
 - *My name is [REDACTED]. I am what everyone likes to call a “Lusher Lifer”. I have been raised in this school since I was five years old, and I have always been very passionate about making our school the best it can be. I am now the [REDACTED] and the founder and president of the [REDACTED]. Following recent events, many teachers have reached out to me asking how they can help. I believe the first step is you showing your students that you stand with them. Actions speak so much louder than words. We are asking that you take a few minutes from each of your classes tomorrow to discuss racial issues at the school to help educate everyone on the reality of prejudice within our community. Below I have attached a document with a plethora of information that may be helpful in facilitating the conversation. Please encourage students to have respectful and considerate conversations.*
- On 11/19/20 many of our students who were offered to apply for our school’s highest honor, “Lusher Scholar” began communicating that they would not accept the award as it was named. To date, more than half of the 64 students offered the award have declined it in a show of support for their black peers. Most students issued this response:
 - *“I hope this email finds you well. I am honored to have been nominated for an award that recognizes the core values of the school community. However, I do not feel comfortable with receiving an honor that is named after a white supremacist. While I believe that is great to reward students based on their accomplishments and adherence to project pride, Robert Mills Lusher was not someone who exemplifies the best of our school. Instead, his values, along with the fact that the administration has not clearly stated that the name of our school will change, exemplifies the worst of our community. The name stands as a symbol of the school’s inability to listen to students of color and create an anti-racist*

environment. I truly believe that we could work together to find a name that better fits the essence of this award. I urge you to rename the honor as we continue to fight for lasting change in our school. Thank you so much!”

- On 11/20/20 I emailed Ms. Riedlinger the following email with regard to the Lusher Scholars process. To date, I have not received a response:
 - *“Kathy, In lieu of the fact that many of our students have chosen not to accept their Lusher Scholars designation, due to its name being associated with a white supremacist, I'd like to move to remove the name Lusher from the distinction this year. We don't need to rename the award, but rather use a more generic term this year until the situation regarding the name is sorted out.*

- Removing the name Lusher from "Lusher Scholars" would not require board approval, but instead our own approval. The decision is ours. If we move forward with the designation as it is currently named, I believe that decision will further ostracize students, create a cloud over the process this year, and will remove deserving students from earning a distinction they have worked hard for over their high school careers. The students who have removed themselves from this process are exceptional students. I believe they deserve this award, and should be provided it without the name Lusher attached. I'd like to request your approval in doing so. Thank you for considering.”*

- On 11/20/20 I was informed that most members of the Class of 2021 were withholding their college acceptance letters and scholarship offers from the school, effectively denying our school the ability to celebrate the successes of these students to the general public.

- On 12/2/20 after it was communicated to Ms. Riedlinger the High School Leadership team’s desire to alter our student of the year process, as to not require the student to be a “Lusher Scholar”, Ms. Riedlinger communicated to us that the high school would no longer be participating in Student of the Year. The elementary and middle schools will still participate.

- On 12/3/20 The President of the █████ sent an email to members of our school community, potentially including members of this board, titled “█████ President’s Side of the Story”. █████ email described the two meetings █████ had with Ms. Riedlinger, and in closing stated the following:
 - *I mention the details of these meetings to expose that although meetings have indeed occurred, they have not resulted in any implied resolution of the student demands or concerns, but instead have only increased hurt and tensions. I felt that it was my responsibility to clear my name of any misinterpretation of my involvement in the aforementioned half-hearted actions. I hope that we can all work together to create a healthier and more supportive environment for all students.*

 - In a subsequent meeting regarding this email communication, when the █████ President was asked why █████ did not reach directly out to Ms. Riedlinger, █████ stated that █████ in fact had reached out to Ms. Riedlinger days prior, but never received a response.

MS. RIEDLINGER ATTEMPTS TO DEFLECT FROM HER MANAGEMENT OF THE RACIAL JUSTICES ISSUES AT LUSHER BY BLAMING OTHERS, INCLUDING ME

I have shared all of the above information for a reason. Understanding the context for what has occurred over the past 6 months, as well how I have been treated because of it, is important in understanding an incident between Ms. Riedlinger and I that recently occurred on 12/4/20. Among other things, Ms. Riedlinger previously had: (1) accused me of knowing who was behind the initial July 4 protest, (2) told me that other people believe I am also behind it, (3)

asked me to draft communication to attorneys stating whether or not I had communicated with the BSU prior to the July 4 march, and (4) twice told me she would be holding me “personally responsible” for the actions of the students in their protests against racial injustice. These unfortunate actions have put me in a challenging position because Ms. Riedlinger is claiming that she will hold me personally responsible for the actions of our students, despite that the students’ actions are in direct response to the absence of effective steps to address the racial justice issues in our community.

As mentioned above, on 10/26/20, the [REDACTED] president sent an email to some teachers asking them to support a “Day of Uncomfortable Conversations”. She stated the following:

- *My name is [REDACTED] I am what everyone likes to call a “Lusher Lifer”. I have been raised in this school since I was five years old, and I have always been very passionate about making our school the best it can be. I am now the [REDACTED] President and the founder and president of the [REDACTED]. Following recent events, many teachers have reached out to me asking how they can help. I believe the first step is you showing your students that you stand with them. Actions speak so much louder than words. We are asking that you take a few minutes from each of your classes tomorrow to discuss racial issues at the school to help educate everyone on the reality of prejudice within our community. Below I have attached a document with a plethora of information that may be helpful in facilitating the conversation. Please encourage students to have respectful and considerate conversations.*

When I became aware of this email, I forwarded the email to Ms. Riedlinger. Ms. Riedlinger responded with “Hi Steven, Please let me know how you plan to handle this”. I met with my [REDACTED] and conferred with him on the matter. Both [REDACTED] and I concluded that the student did not violate any of our school rules and committed no infraction. We concluded that the student had a first amendment right to communicate with teachers a desire for them to discuss matters regarding racial equity, and that the student did not disrupt the educational environment by making this request. In the well-known *Tinker* case, the Supreme Court ruled that school officials could censor student-initiated expression if officials could reasonably forecast that the speech created a substantial disruption or material interference with school activities or invaded the rights of others. However, the Court emphasized that school officials *may not suppress student speech simply because they do not like it*.

When I communicated this to Ms. Riedlinger, she challenged me and told me that “You could find an infraction if you really wanted to, you just don’t want to”. She then asked me to put in writing that I did not “know what to do”. I clarified for her that it was not that I did not know what to do, but rather that the student had not committed an infraction. I sincerely asked Ms. Riedlinger to please provide me guidance if she disagreed with my approach, but she refused to do so.

It was in that moment that I began to believe that Ms. Riedlinger’s requests for me to put things in writing, as well as her unwillingness to provide guidance to me, had a different purpose. I began to believe that she was attempting to avoid taking ownership for the failures of the response, and instead looking to place blame elsewhere. While I previously had felt similar reservations, these latest actions made it clear that Ms. Riedlinger’s actions were becoming more calculated. In other words, Ms. Riedlinger’s efforts were intended to portray me as an ineffective leader who was unwilling to discipline our students. Although demonstrably incorrect, this attempt to disparage my job performance ultimately would provide Ms. Riedlinger with an alternative explanation (aside from her own handling of the situation) to justify why our students, faculty, and families remain dissatisfied with Lusher’s response to racial equity issues.

INCIDENT WITH MS. RIEDLINGER ON 12/4/2020

This brings me to incident in question. On 11/30/20, Ms. Riedlinger sent a letter to the community which detailed in part our responses to racial equity at Lusher. In the letter, Ms. Riedlinger referenced meeting with the “president of the high school [REDACTED] twice”.

The President of the [REDACTED] responded to Ms. Riedlinger’s email on 12/3/20, issuing her own “side of the story”. After she originally emailed Ms. Riedlinger and received no response,

she then sent an email to members of our school community titled “██████████ President’s Side of the Story”. Once again, her email described the two meetings she had with Ms. Riedlinger, and in closing stated the following:

- *I mention the details of these meetings to expose that although meetings have indeed occurred, they have not resulted in any implied resolution of the student demands or concerns, but instead have only increased hurt and tensions. I felt that it was my responsibility to clear my name of any misinterpretation of my involvement in the aforementioned half-hearted actions. I hope that we can all work together to create a healthier and more supportive environment for all students.*

When I received the email, I immediately went to speak with our ██████████ ██████████. We discussed the email in great detail, trying to decide if an infraction occurred. We ultimately decided that an infraction did occur, *i.e.*, using school technology for reasons unrelated to educational purposes, and inappropriate network usage by disclosing personal information about anyone. I asked ██████████ to reach out to Ms. Riedlinger making her aware of our findings. ██████████ emailed Ms. Riedlinger stating that an infraction did occur. He communicated to me later that she had called him and told him she would be getting advice from her attorneys on the matter.

The following day, 12/4/20, I received a phone call from Ms. Riedlinger at 8:34am. It was a very short conversation, lasting exactly 30 seconds. In a stern tone, she stated “Steven, ██████████ called me last night and wants to know how you are going to handle the situation with ██████████. I said “okay”, and we hung up.

I immediately walked out of my office and into the hall. As I entered the hall, I saw ██████████ walking down the hall toward the middle school side with a cup of water. I called to him, he turned around, came back to me, and we entered his office. When we sat down, I told him that I just got a call from Ms. Riedlinger. He said, “Me too, she wants to give her a warning”. I was surprised with his response and told him that I had just got off the phone with her too, where she stated ██████████ wanted to know how I was going to handle the situation, with no prior mention of a warning for the student, and that the Board expected to be promptly provided with this information. ██████████ then explained to me that Ms. Riedlinger called him, advised him that the student should get a warning, be told that if she were to do it again, she would be suspended, and be reminded of her role as a student leader.

We spoke for a few more minutes and ██████████ phone rang. He told me it was Ms. Riedlinger, and I exited the room so he could take the call. I waited outside the office talking with ██████████. After a few minutes, ██████████ opened his office door and called me back in. When I sat down, he told me that Ms. Riedlinger wanted he and I to meet with the ██████████ president right then and there. Being that the student is ██████████ emailed ██████████ requesting a meeting. The student eventually emailed back, and we set up a phone call shortly thereafter.

██████████ and I went to my office to call the student. During the conversation, we explained that ██████████ had committed a technology violation (using school technology for reasons unrelated to educational purposes, and inappropriate network usage by disclosing personal information about anyone). ██████████ debated the infractions at some level. We then explained that ██████████ would be given a warning and would be suspended if ██████████ were to violate this policy again. We finished the call and ██████████ left my office to put together a folder on the incident.

That same day, at 4:01 pm I received a call from Ms. Riedlinger. The call lasted 6 minutes. She discussed some new COVID-19 cases that emerged at the lower school, as well as an Instagram account we had become aware of which had inappropriate content on it. When we were getting off the phone, she stated one last thing. She asked me to send her an email detailing how the situation with the ██████████ president was handled, and then abruptly ended the conversation. I began to believe that Ms. Riedlinger’s request was not authentic, and that it was instead an effort on her part to have me put in writing how I handled the situation, which would in turn allow her to make it appear as if I had handled the incident too lightly. My assumption in the moment was that she would then use this documentation to further develop a narrative about me, once again in an effort to corroborate her own (incorrect) portrayal of the situation. I called ██████████ at 4:08 pm, and we spoke for 9 minutes. I explained that Ms. Riedlinger asked me to put in

writing how the situation was handled, and we discussed the facts of the case. I shared with him verbally what I was going to write and asked if he was okay with the language. He confirmed that the information we were providing was correct and accurate.

I drafted an email to Ms. Riedlinger with the facts of the incident, and how it was handled. I sent the email to her at 4:29pm. The email stated the following, in full:

Kathy,

Regarding the email that was sent on 12/3/20 by [REDACTED], [REDACTED] and I addressed the situation today with the student. After speaking with [REDACTED] yesterday, you advised him to meet with [REDACTED] and myself, give her a warning related to an electronic policy violation, discuss her role as a school leader, and make her aware that further communication such as this would result in a more significant consequence like a suspension. We held the meeting with [REDACTED] via phone conference, and communicated each of those items. [REDACTED] has created a folder of materials for our records.

I do also want to share that I don't necessarily believe that any consequence, whether it be a warning or a suspension, will fully resolve this matter. There is obviously some tension with the student, and finding a way to resolve this issue with her would help dissuade further actions. I do believe we should discuss a proactive strategy before another incident occurs.

I left the office and began walking home. At 4:45 pm I received a call from [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] was clearly distressed, stating to me that Ms. Riedlinger had just called him and that she was “f***ing livid”. He told me that she was angry, yelling, out of control, and asked him to write a statement contradicting my account. He told me that he could not do that because he was not “going to lie”, and that he did not know why she was doing this. The call lasted 2 minutes and ended when [REDACTED] informed me that Ms. Riedlinger was calling him yet again.

[REDACTED] called me back again at 4:50 pm. That call lasted 36 seconds, as Ms. Riedlinger called him yet another time while I was on the phone. [REDACTED] called me back once more at 4:55 pm. He explained that Ms. Riedlinger continued to ask him to write a statement contradicting my account and that he was not supposed to “share the conversation” about consequences that she had with him. He stated that she asked him numerous questions about what exactly he had shared with me and continued to ask him to change the response. [REDACTED] obviously was still in distress, questioning why Ms. Riedlinger would put him in that type of situation. He kept sharing with me that he is not this kind of person, and that he has too high of ethics to write something that is not true. He then shared with me that he may need to offer to resign rather than to lie, as he could not deal with this. He stated that going against her would be “suicide”. [REDACTED] was on his way home and told me that Ms. Riedlinger told him to call her back when he got to the house. He told me he was planning on talking with his wife when he got home to decide what to do.

I received a final phone call from [REDACTED] at 6:05 pm. It lasted 4 minutes. [REDACTED] shared with me that during his call with Ms. Riedlinger, he offered to resign, as he could not in good conscience do what she was asking him to do. He explained that Ms. Riedlinger then told him that she did not want him to resign, and that he should consider the matter over with. He told me he called me because he wanted me to be sure that he was going to do the right thing, and that he was not going to lie. I thanked him and we wished each other a good weekend. As of the present date, Ms. Riedlinger still has not spoken to me about any of these so-called “issues”, much less attempted to have a substantive conversation with me about them.

It greatly saddens me that I am forced to reach out to you in this manner. In all of my career, I have never been involved in an incident the likes of this. I hold a high regard for ethics and integrity, as does [REDACTED] and any and every Lusher stakeholder you speak to would reiterate that about both of us. I would implore each of you to discuss with any of my students, teachers, staff, or families how they view me against the highest

standards of character. I have been a model employee, and I believe a great asset to this school community.

I ask the Advocates for Arts Based Education Board take this matter very seriously. I ask that they hold all of their employees to a high standard, without exception. I welcome further discussion at your earliest convenience. At that time, I can provide additional documentation in the form of emails, text messages, and statements that corroborate the aforementioned events. I can also provide names of individuals who can further discuss these matters with you. In the meantime, I respectfully ask that I report directly to a committee on the board, rather than Ms. Riedlinger or any other staff member at Lusher Charter School, until an investigation is completed, and this matter is resolved in an appropriate manner. I am taking this matter very seriously, as my career, character, reputation, and the healing this school-community are of great value to me.

Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Dr. Steven Corbett
High School Principal
Lusher Charter School