



**Marysville
School District**

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**Finance & Operations
Executive Director
Dr. Lisa Gonzales**

To: Superintendent Reykdahl
Chief of Staff Jeffries
Deputy Superintendent Miller
Chief Financial Officer Kelly
Chief Legal Matt Schultz
From: Dr. Lisa Gonzales
Re: Investigation Needed in Marysville School District
Date: Thursday, May 30, 2024

I am represented by legal counsel Joe Schaeffer of MacDonald Hoague & Bayless who is in support of this communication to all of you regarding the toxic environment, intimidation, and misrepresentation of information in the Marysville School District. I am expecting to be placed on administrative leave for speaking up and trying to stop what I know to be very unethical behavior.

I am reporting to you now because I was hired to be a steward of taxpayer dollars and need to speak up on these matters of public concern.

On May 15, 2024, I made a call to Board Member Kristen Michal, leaving a message on her phone to call me, explaining that the behaviors and intimidation were really bad within top leadership in the district and I was trying to report unethical and illegal behavior. The call was made from my parents' cell phone and I informed her of that. I never heard from her.

On May 22, 2024, I had a weekly meeting with ED of HR, Alvin Cooper. At times it was heated as I shared the ongoing issues we have with his staff and leaves. At that time, I informed him that I had reported us to the State Auditor for our practices.

On May 23, 2024, I was informed by Superintendent Zac Robbins that he would not renew my contract, despite having a legally binding agreement that he had signed, wanting to get us all under contract before you all weighed in on the next steps in binding conditions (this happened May 14-20).

On May 23, 2024, I reached out to Board members Michel and Wade Rinehardt via email at 11:37 am with a note that included the following: *"I have about 100 pages of paperwork that you might like to see because I've been keeping evidence of what's been going on in the district as have many of my colleagues. This feels very retaliatory that I have been pointing out a number of illicit and immoral practices in the district."*

Over the last few months, the service center has become very toxic. My staff members are scared, as they observe inappropriate comments from the Human Resources team (including "we need to get rid of anyone who has been here" and blatant badmouthing of their own team members in open meetings). The Human Resources Department, led by Alvin Cooper, is not a place where any of my staff can go to report problem behavior, issues of impropriety in the workplace, or abusive behavior from the leader in the HR Department.

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Many staff have gone to meet with Dr. Robbins to no avail. I am speaking up to help protect other employees in the Service Center and I implore you to begin an immediate investigation into the corrupt behavior and cronyism. My staff also does not feel it even possible to go to internal Legal Counsel Claudette Rushing, as they also believe she is in fear of any continued speaking up this year that might risk her own employment. As a colleague, this has been evident over the last few months.

The monthly union/leadership meetings was held on Wednesday morning of this week, with an outline of the letter you sent about binding conditions and next steps with our insurance. Dr. Robbins lied from beginning to end, trying to talk about a plan to meet layoff staff and to meet your June 1st deadline. It was apparent to all union members in the room that he was dancing around questions, had no answers, had no plan, and when pushed, could not complete any thoughtful approaches to how the group might be communicated with or worked with. After the meeting, as I stayed to answer questions from one union leader, three of bargaining group leaders came up with comments about the sheer lack of leadership, honesty and integrity. I agreed to follow up with one after the meeting.

In early May, I reached out to State Auditor Kristina Baylor on her cell phone and we discussed my concerns with operations in the Human Resources Department, specifically about leaves. I asked her if they could take a deep dive into leaves so see how broken our process is from the HR side. The payroll team has been trying to work through accurate payments of salaries and more, and we are overpaying staff on regular basis because of the misinformation. Kristina and I spoke again on May 14th (1:06 pm) and May 16th (11:31 am) on her work cell phone to follow up on reports that had been submitted to her office from the HR staff. I pointed out about a dozen process and documentation errors that had been taking place and asked that the analysis include this school year as well, as the system is more broken this year than before. I told her I feared retaliation and didn't want anyone to know I was the one reporting it.

When I had my weekly HR/ Finance meeting with Mr. Cooper on May 22nd, I let him know that I had "turned us in to the State Auditor" for the practices in HR around leaves not being managed by his staff member, Necole. I have included my notes from that meeting as one of the many attachments here.

In the process of trying to develop our Comprehensive Fiscal Plan, our leadership team had permission to build out a plan with reductions that included the closing of Legacy High School (at a savings of \$1.3M) and the elimination of the Communications Specialist role (at a savings of around \$140K). At the 11th hour, the Superintendent let us know the board was no longer interested in moving the Legacy program to a comprehensive high school, and Director of Communications Jodi Runyon insisted that he keep the position, which our leadership team was concerned would happen. I specifically asked Dr. Robbins in a meeting if we could meet two on one with board members to explain the financial impact of Legacy. He said no.

There is also a notable amount of cronyism that is taking place that will absolutely be validated when you interview staff: if you are close with Dr. Robbins, you are given preferential treatment, including obtaining positions without having appropriate experience. This would likely be why Legacy was taken off the table, certainly why the Communications position was removed, and most recently, a plan from the leadership team in the revised fiscal plan to eliminate a second Director of Special Education is off the table, so in essence we created a plan with positions he will not allow to be eliminated. Furthermore, the heir apparent is not qualified for the position but is a friend of Dr. Robbins.

The first Comprehensive Financial Plan was submitted with errors that our unions pointed out. Specifically, the number of employees was incorrect, particularly for certificated staff. When I stated in a meeting that we needed to inform OSPI of the error, Dr. Robbins said it would not sit well to show we made an error, and he directed us to not change the numbers; he did have Mr Cooper call Shawn Lewis and say that there were groups of teachers he didn't include as a way to get out of the error pointed out by the unions. Those numbers, provided by HR, were then revised for the Revised Fiscal Plan and increased by over a hundred staff.

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On April 26th, Mr Lewis asked for more data from the finance team, and Susan Halliday sent me a message that she “highly recommend we give corrected Staff FTE Levels” suggesting we provide the accurate numbers that were inaccurate in the first plan (paragraph above). Dr. Robbins’ response was “give him what he is asking for,” which did not include anything about staff numbers. We tried to correct a known error and were directed not to.

In January, Executive Directors Cooper and Voni Walker decided to call a snow day on a day after a delayed start. In the email documentation attached here, you will see how Dr. Robbins asked why he wasn’t the first one called because he seemingly didn’t know there was an issue with the day. When Cooper and Walker walked around the service center, they sent staff home. The fiscal staff spoke up and said staff cannot just go home - they have to take a personal day for the rest of the day or they could stay and work. When I learned of this, I reached out to Legal Counsel Rushing who started the legal research while I contacted the ESD and a neighboring Assistant Superintendent. We wanted to ensure that what the fiscal staff was saying was accurate, and it was: you cannot give workers a “free day”. Rushing pointed this out in the email with the legal references and said we needed to correct it as soon as possible.

The Superintendent’s direction was clear: No.

The HR department has not responded to months of requests for open positions, similar to what the unions had asked for, so we have no way to estimate the cost of vacant and unfilled positions for budget development nor for the 24/25 budget development. I again pointed this out to Dr. Robbins - the HR team was deliberately undermining the work of the fiscal team, making it very difficult for us to move forward with real budget development.

There is an email from Mr Cooper about technology restructuring, stating he had raised a matter with me to restructure his department and the need for more funds. I again told him what we had discussed on May 1st: “I explained that we had no funds for this. You said you understood and that was the last of it.”

There is an email showing Dr. Robbins overruling denials of travel. This had happened a few times where I would stick to budgets and process and was overruled. While you cannot see it in the chart because the comment went further into the cell, it said “yes per ZR.” When I went in and spoke to Dr. Robbins and told him he just overrode a denial because there was a lack of funds, he responded that it wasn’t what he was told. This is a frequent occurrence - if his friends come in and want something done, it happens, regardless of any safeguards we put in place.

A meeting agenda with Mr Cooper and Payroll Supervisor Kim Simon from January 22nd shows CBAs not being cost out, days provided to staff that were not part of their CBAs, salary agreement errors, the long standing issue of MAA (Marysville Admin Assoc) work days, the SEIU 10 errors, and SEIU 12 salary schedules that were still incorrect.

Last week, I sent a message to our leadership team as we had a lockdown at a school site and our Director of Safety & Security joined me in reaching out to principals in the area, only to learn they were not at school that day but that was not in the attendance system. I suggested an audit, our attorney agreed, but it won’t happen. We do not monitor attendance and sick days districtwide, which is likely why a community hotline complaint came in on the topic.

The biggest concern I have right now is the necessary data needed for budget development is not ready for the finance team and, to make matters worse, it could all have been resolved by allowing NWRDC or Shawn Lewis to come into the district for a day to help with it. Shawn estimated it would take about 12 hours to complete. Instead, I was told that we did not need his help and our HR team would complete the work. Emails here will show they could not and NWRDC came back with the need to take more than a month (end of April). Please review the emails that show that NRWDC sent the documents on May 3rd and Mr Cooper did not send them until the 23rd, rendering our fiscal staff incapable of trying to build a real budget for the Revised Comprehensive Fiscal Plan. At this point in time, the HR team has not completed the tasks outlined in the lengthy concern letter from Mike Critchett and we are running out of time.

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Finally, Dr. Robbins and Mr Cooper are meeting with bargaining groups and agreeing to MOUs that have financial implications without ever communicating that to the finance team, particularly me. This has been happening all year. I have asked repeatedly, as has Simon, to be included before any MOUs are signed. This is especially important for the input from payroll so the MOU doesn't bind us to a task that is near impossible to accurately complete, yet this continues to happen. The latest examples are two MOUs from SEIU 10:

- a. VEBA contributions were supposed to have remained the same for this year, agreed to by the union, and Mr Cooper and Dr. Robbins signed an MOU that added \$5/month for each contribution, a cost of \$24,300 a year more than they were entitled to or even agreed to. The added challenge with this is that other groups will want the same amount, which increases to cost more than \$150K a year should we agree to it. I followed up to ask why they were signing MOUs giving a union more than they asked for but received no response.
- b. Safe Schools trainings were part of a November 11, 2023 MOU that stated staff would receive 2 days of limited personal leave. In the May 16, 2024 MOU, Mr Cooper and Dr. Robbins agreed to a payout of these funds, which we have not budgeted and estimate at \$160K including benefits.

My experience within the Marysville School District has been nothing but positive, with the exception of the blatant cronyism that has been taking place that supports the practices mentioned in this letter. My team and so many staff at the service center have been deeply committed to working through the challenges of binding conditions and being the best stewards of taxpayer dollars that we can be. But we cannot do that with leaders who are dishonest, unethical, and blatantly disregard practices the district needs to be fiscally sound.

I am fairly confident the district will not be able to meet the parameters of binding conditions in the short term. The patterns I've been able to see in enrollment with numbers I just received this week for trends in 2021 and 2022 show that we will drop even more during the summer. Dr. Robbins also doesn't plan on eliminating positions we submitted to Mr Lewis, and as of Wednesday of this week in the union meeting, there were no solid plans for who, what and when, which can be verified by any of the union leaders who were present.

One of my long term mentors told me, "You weren't hired to be right, you were hired to do right." I've tried my best, but the system isn't set up for success with the current leadership. On behalf of the Marysville community, you need to step in, provide the environment for staff at the service center to express what they are seeing, share evidence they have, and reassure them and the community that action can be taken to address what is damaging the staff, students, and community.

Sincerely,



Dr. Lisa Gonzales
Executive Director, Finance & Operations

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