

**RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PRINCE WILLIAM
COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD REGARDING CRITICAL
REFORMS**

Recommendations Provided By:

Teachers, Staff and Parents of Prince William County

Prepared By:

Pete Candland

Supervisor, Gainesville

Prince William Board of County Supervisors

May 2018

**MESSAGE FROM SUPERVISOR PETE CANDLAND
TO THE PRINCE WILLIAM SCHOOL BOARD**

There are few things more important to the quality of life in our community than the education of our children. In Prince William County, we commit 57.23% of every tax dollar we collect from our citizens for the goal of achieving the very best possible educational system. That investment affirms our belief that educational excellence is formed in the classroom by teachers, staff members, administrators and parents working closely together to give our children the very best learning environment.

The current “crisis of trust” we are facing in our school system involves the processes and procedures that are meant to protect and help our teachers, staff members, parents, and students, but have instead created a negative environment. Many feel that the School Administration, under the leadership of Superintendent Walts, penalizes those who offer recommendations; penalizes those who identify problems in the system; or penalizes those who file complaints under a grievance system that is supposed to offer a fair and equitable adjudication of a complaint.

The recommendations offered in this report were obtained largely through phone calls, some emails or texts, and two separate meetings that were held on May 14, 2018 at Ronald Reagan Middle School. The first meeting was a closed-session discussion with teachers and staff from across Prince William County. During this discussion, participants were given a safe environment to share their experiences and express their ideas for change. At the conclusion of the closed-session meeting, the group adjourned into a larger Public Forum which included over 100 community participants.

We owe our teachers, staff members and parents the basic respect to express themselves without fear of reprisal or retaliation when an issue arises that impedes the delivery of a quality educational experience for our children in the classroom. I am compelled to offer this report because of the volume of complaints, the consistency of the accounts that clearly document the current broken complaint process and the shocking testimonies regarding retaliation by principals or administrators against teachers, staff members or parents who complain.

While I understand that the ultimate decision on whether or not to adopt these recommendations rests in the hands of the School Board, it is my hope that we can work together to improve our school system and develop a culture where our teachers, staff members, parents, and students are respected and protected.

It is my hope that these reforms will be adopted before the start of the upcoming school year.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 703-792-6195 or at gainesville@pwcgov.org.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pete Candland', written in a cursive style.

Pete Candland
Supervisor, Gainesville
Prince William Board of County Supervisors

RECOMMENDATION 1
INDEPENDENT OMBUDSMAN OFFICE

While this has already been a topic of discussion for the School Board and has been a part of the overall budget deliberations, the teachers and parents felt strongly that an Independent Ombudsman Office must be created. With the volume of complaints brought to my attention, it seems likely that this office will need to have several staffers in order to properly review concerns and adjudicate claims in a timely manner.

The mission of the Ombudsman Office will be to investigate complaints to ensure that proper procedures are being followed and all parties are being fairly represented and protected. Teachers and parents need to have an independent resource to contact if they feel that they have been the victim of retaliation or have legitimate complaints dismissed by an administrator.

Most importantly, however, this office **MUST** report directly to the elected officials on the School Board, not the School Superintendent. This will provide not only independence, but accountability for the elected officials to ensure that these issues will be addressed and resolved fairly and equitably.

All records developed and maintained by this office must be treated with extreme sensitivity, appropriate confidentiality, and released only by vote of the School Board.

RECOMMENDATION 2
ANNUAL PERFORMANCE AUDIT OF OMBUDSMAN OFFICE

Each year, an outside firm must be hired to conduct a performance audit of the Ombudsman Office to ensure that cases are being handled efficiently and with the proper procedures in place. It is critical that all involved (administrators, teachers, staff members and parents) feel that the Ombudsman Office is working independently and, in a manner, consistent with its mission.

Each audit must be published for the public to review (with appropriate redactions of personnel information).

RECOMMENDATION 3 INDEPENDENT SURVEYS

One of the more controversial revelations to come out of the closed session and public discussions on May 14 was that the annual performance and satisfaction survey was conducted and implemented by the School Administration. Each teacher would receive an email with a link that directly tied them to their survey responses. The teachers were told that this was an anonymous survey, but it was sent to their individual email address and any responses would have identifying metadata that would compromise true anonymity. In addition, several teachers shared that they have been directed by their principals on how to complete the surveys.

The concern from most was that that school administrators would be able to see individual teacher responses with identifying information. Many felt this would lead to retaliation, including, but not limited to, being put on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). These surveys **MUST** be conducted by an independent

outside firm who can provide the topline results to the School Board and Administration, while protecting the identity of the participants.

Surveys are only as effective as the independence to those taking them. If teachers, staff members, students and parents and feel that they can't be honest in their assessments during the survey, there is no reason to make this expenditure each year.

RECOMMENDATION 4

SURVEYS MUST LEAD TO POSITIVE RESULTS

The purpose of an organizational survey is to measure the level of satisfaction by employees or those impacted by the work of the organization (ex. parents). But a survey is only truly effective if the results lead to positive action.

The School Board must enact processes that automatically highlight when a school shows a pattern or trajectory of discontent and allows for the immediate investigation of why that is happening. If a school shows a pattern of decline in satisfaction, the School Board must be notified, and a representative from the

Ombudsman Office is sent to the school to discuss concerns with the teachers and staff.

**Prince William County Schools
Trends: Divisionwide Survey
Reagan MS
T/TA:Teacher/Teacher Assistant**

Goal	Construct	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	Prior Year Difference	3 Year Change	Level Score	Level Difference	Division Score	Division Difference
Goal 1 Instructional Program	Best Instructional Practices	95.7%	91.1%	86.4%	↓ -4.7%	-4.2%	92.2%	↓ -5.7%	94.9%	↓ -3.9%
	Student Assessment	95.2%	90.9%	89.0%	↓ -1.8%	-6.7%	91.0%	↓ -2.8%	93.2%	↓ -4.1%
Goal 2 Climate	Caring Environment	86.4%	85.0%	53.8%	↓ -31.7%	-34.0%	85.8%	↓ -31.8%	91.1%	↓ -37.3%
	Effective Communication	81.8%	81.2%	47.0%	↓ -34.2%	-34.9%	78.4%	↓ -35.4%	85.1%	↓ -38.1%
	Orderly Environment,Conducive to Learning	87.2%	79.8%	70.5%	↓ -8.4%	-16.8%	82.4%	↓ -12.0%	87.1%	↓ -16.7%
	Safe and Healthy Environment	98.8%	100.0%	87.0%	↓ -13.0%	-11.8%	88.0%	↓ -1.0%	94.9%	↓ -7.9%
Goal 3 Family Involvement	School and Parent Communication	98.6%	96.6%	92.9%	↓ -4.6%	-6.0%	94.8%	↓ -2.8%	96.9%	↓ -4.0%
	School provides information to help parents be partners	88.1%	86.4%	55.8%	↓ -4.6%	-8.9%	86.9%	↓ -9.9%	92.2%	↓ -8.8%
	Variety of ways to be substantially involved at school	91.7%	83.1%	64.0%	↓ -19.1%	-27.6%	82.7%	↓ -19.7%	89.4%	↓ -25.4%
Goal 4 Work Opportunities	Career Progression	77.2%	72.5%	50.8%	↓ -21.8%	-26.4%	76.9%	↓ -28.2%	85.1%	↓ -34.3%
	Collaboration and Team Work	75.1%	65.4%	28.2%	↓ -39.2%	-48.9%	70.4%	↓ -44.2%	79.9%	↓ -53.8%
	Continuous Improvement	80.2%	68.2%	35.6%	↓ -32.0%	-44.6%	73.7%	↓ -38.1%	82.5%	↓ -46.9%
	Faculty and Staff Education, Training, and Development	75.0%	81.7%	75.2%	↓ -6.5%	-0.1%	85.9%	↓ -10.7%	86.9%	↓ -12.8%
	Overall Job Satisfaction/ Positive Attitude Toward Career or Job	88.0%	89.8%	81.5%	↓ -8.1%	-20.5%	94.2%	↓ -22.7%	90.1%	↓ -28.6%
Goal 5 Central Office	Central Processes	96.5%	59.5%	27.4%	↓ -32.2%	-29.0%	57.1%	↓ -29.7%	64.8%	↓ -37.4%
	Overall efficacy/Quality of service of Central Office	83.8%	87.2%	82.0%	↓ -4.7%	-1.2%	85.5%	↓ -2.9%	86.7%	↓ -4.2%

As shown in the chart above, over a three-year period, Ronald Reagan Middle School witnessed a 35% decline in “Caring Environment”, 35% decline in “Effective Communication”, 49% decline in “Collaboration and Team Work”, 45% decline in “Continuous Improvement”, and a 27% decline in “Overall Job

Satisfaction.” These measurements would raise flags in any organization and clearly shows there were issues that needed to be addressed at this school.

The new processes enacted by the School Board must look to help the administrators and teachers in these types of struggling schools, not just leave it up to the administrators at the school.

RECOMMENDATION 5

REFORM THE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN (PIP)

Currently, many teachers believe that the objective of the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) is not to help facilitate improvements by the individual, but a weapon to be used to control and punish teachers who the administrators have concerns about, even if those concerns are invalid or personal in nature and unrelated to job performance.

The PIP process needs to allow teachers to be able to challenge the validity of the concerns outside of the on-site administrators. Some organizations have instituted a “blind” committee of teachers and administrators who review submitted challenges of PIPs, without knowledge of the parties involved – they just review the facts and make recommendations on each case.

Under the current system, many teachers feel trapped within a PIP because they feel that once the PIP is submitted, they are stuck within that particular school site. There were several testimonies I received of teachers who openly criticized their principal or the principal’s policies, were put on a PIP immediately following the criticism and then were unable to transfer to another school. This creates an even

more difficult working environment for a teacher who has filed a complaint against their principal because they cannot escape the situation. Teachers need to have more options when it comes to working through a PIP.

RECOMMENDATION 6

CONDUCT LISTENING SESSIONS WITH TEACHERS, STAFF AND PARENTS

The Prince William County Police Chief, Barry Bernard, conducts regular listening tours around Prince William County to hear the concerns and input of citizens regarding the performance of the police department. If an issue arises in a particular area of the community regarding the police department, Chief Bernard, tries to highlight that area for his next meeting.

The School Board and Superintendent must implement a similar process where they conduct regular “Listening Sessions” around the county. I recall President Ronald Reagan sending his Secretary of Education, William Bennett, on just such a Listening Tour to schools around the country. Superintendent Walts must engage with the community on these concerns expressed herein where he meets with teachers and parents to hear their concerns and the accounts of how the current system is failing them.

There is no personnel matter that will prohibit anyone from the School Board or Administration from **listening** to the concerns of teachers and parents. While the representatives from the School Board and Administration might not be able to comment on a particular situation (similar to how Chief Bernard can’t comment on

the specifics of an ongoing investigation), they can perform one of the most important duties of a public servant – listen.

RECOMMENDATION 7

ANONYMITY MUST BE MAINTAINED IN PERSONNEL COMPLAINTS

When a complaint against an on-site school administrator is submitted, all efforts must be made to ensure the anonymity of the person submitting the complaint. At no time during the process, should the administrator at the school be made aware of the person(s) submitting the complaint. Information can only be shared through an affirmative vote by the School Board. Furthermore, witnesses who are called to confirm or refute a complaint must also remain anonymous, as many have shared concerns that they too will be retaliated against if they come forward.

RECOMMENDATION 8

SUPERINTENDENT WALTS MUST BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE

There has been a tremendous amount of discussion regarding the future of Superintendent Walts within Prince William County Schools. The overwhelming feedback over the last few months is that Walts has created a culture within the school system that suppresses dissent, enables “bad actors” to use the processes to retaliate against teachers and staff, and shifts the blame of issues arising in individual schools to the parents and teachers.

While the vast majority of people who reached out to me expressed their desire for the Superintendent to be replaced, ultimately, this is a decision made by the majority of the School Board. My hope is that the School Board will look at this

situation seriously and without partisan prejudices and make a decision based on what's in the best interest for the future of our school system.

At a minimum, Superintendent Walts' annual performance requirements must include measurements about teacher satisfaction, addressing the concerns within this report, and reestablishing trust with the teachers, staff, and parents of Prince William County.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

The recommendations provided in this report are derived from the input and feedback from teachers, staff members and parents across Prince William County. These recommendations are not an exhaustive list of all the concerns but should help start the facilitated conversation on reforms that need to be implemented.

These concerns are not solely based in one part of the county but permeate across economic and geographical demographics. There are real concerns with the School Administration and the culture they have created – one of distrust and fear. We cannot continue to have teachers, staff members and parents who feel that their concerns are not being heard and if they were to speak out, risk retaliation.

It is critical that the School Board take immediate action to address these issues.