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Hereford Works Calls For School Bd. Review

by Michael Ruby

Hereford High School parents are about to teach a lesson to the members of the Baltimore County Board of Education who they say should know better. And it may get nasty.

After months of politely asking for a dialogue to discuss proposed changes to the scheduling system for upper school students, a group of parents are seeking outside help from judicial and state education officials to force the local school board members to follow their own policies and procedures.

Because the board has failed to exert its authority, school superintendent Dr. S. Dallas Dance has acted in an "arbitrary and capricious manner" that is putting "at risk current and future students" attending the northern Baltimore County educational facility, according to a lawyer representing the Hereford parents.

On April 14, attorney Adam M. Spence was expected to file a formal request with the Baltimore County school board to review plans that would change the scheduling practices for all high school students. The action, said Spence, is necessary to exhaust all administrative remedies and clear the way for future legal action, if necessary.

"The board so far has been unresponsive," said Spence. "But it must hold the superintendent accountable for his arbitrary and capricious actions.

"We believe the school board will take the initiative to realize the flawed processes which have led to this decision," said Spence. "And they will stay the change until a full and complete study can be done in accordance with their own policies in place."

Doesn't get involved

That means a thoroughly researched review conducted in an open forum with members of all interested parties involved. Not just one consultant report working with incorrect data which reached "a pre-ordained conclusion," Spence added.

The Villager went to press prior to the request being submitted but Spence assured that the action was being taken on behalf of Hereford Works, a group of Hereford High School parents, students and friends who are fighting to preserve the existing scheduling approach, known as the 4x4 semester block. The proposed changes would remove the opportunity for students to achieve and excel, contend opponents to the new schedule which school officials say adds uniformity to the public education system.

Since Thanksgiving, Hereford Works members have been questioning school board president Lawrence E. Schmidt about what and why and how the proposed change may be implemented and whether it may be delayed, stopped, dismissed or altered. Schmidt has told them the board doesn't get involved in administrative matters and that the policy is going ahead at the request and insistence of the system's superintendent.

But the recently filed formal request for a review will outline the laws and regulations which authorize the board to make all policy decisions -- in effect, teaching the board its job.

"The school board can't abdicate it's authority to the superintendent," said Spence, who is the father of three and a Hereford Zone resident. His eldest is a son in the ninth grade at Hereford High School.

Flurry of filings

If the local school board declines to conduct the requested review, Spence said he will appeal the decision to the Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Lillian M. Lowery and the Maryland State Board of Education which can require the review.

"We want some accountability and to disclose the flawed processes for implementation of this massive policy shift in our children's education," he said. Also, Spence said he is preparing a flurry of filings before the circuit court including an injunction that will halt any change in the scheduling for next year. The proposed lawsuit before the judicial authorities will include:

- A request for a finding that the school board has not fully complied with a Freedom of Information Order for documents leading up to the scheduling change;
- A ruling that the school board violated the state's open meeting laws;
- A writ of mandamus request requiring the school board to conduct a review in compliance with existing rules and regulations of the decision to change the scheduling;
- A request for the judge to review the process and final conclusion calling for the scheduling change.

Spence said he expects those requests to be filed with the court by the end of the month, pending what action the school board does or does not take.

Done its homework

Don't think Hereford Works hasn't done its homework when teaching the virtues of the 4x4 semester block schedule that has served Hereford High so well. In the few short months since its formation, Hereford Works has demonstrated to the satisfaction of numerous organizations and elected officials that the block semester approach works.

In addition to about 1,500 individual members (according to the group's web site HerefordWorks.org), Hereford Works enjoys the support of the union which represents all county teachers, the governing body of the county's PTSA's, the union representing county school administrators, the three state senators who represent various parts of the Hereford Zone and all seven Baltimore County Council Members.

At an April 7 fund raiser held by Hereford Works at Casa Mia's Restaurant in Hereford, Third District Councilman Todd Huff said all seven members of the legislative panel were signing a joint letter to the school board in support of this 4x4 block schedule "for use by schools countywide."

"They loved it so much that they want it for their schools," said Huff of his fellow lawmakers following presentations by Hereford Works members.

More than 200 tickets at \$45 a pop were sold for the fund raiser which will help finance the group's legal battle, according to Hereford Works leaders.

'A fourth alternative'

Why is the 4x4 block schedule so enticing to all but Dance? The facts speak for themselves, contended Wendy Flowers, one of the group's leaders.

During an April 9 appearance on the "Midday with Dan Rodricks" radio show aired by WYPR-FM 88.1, Flowers rattled off statistics showing how Hereford students have successfully utilized the program.

Out of more than 21,000 schools in America, Hereford High is ranked 235 in STEM education and 426 overall, according to U.S. News & World Reports. The school boasts a 100 percent graduation rate with 93 percent of seniors going on to college, four percent entering the work force directly and three percent enlisting in the military. And a staggering nearly 60 percent of seniors have taken at least one advanced placement course and exam. Flowers added that "23 of the top 25 high schools in Maryland use this schedule that [Superintendent] Dance is taking away. "There is no justifiable reason to take it away. All we are advocating for is that it be included as a fourth alternative in the scheduling available to schools."

Compromised offered

In an earlier segment of Rodrick's radio show, Dance said he is "extremely proud of the advocacy by the parents" and has offered Hereford students a compromise that would allow next year's juniors and seniors to continue on the current schedule track "since they have planned their careers on the 4-by-4 block."

However, Dance added, "change can be difficult. And when looking at a system-wide decision, you have to keep the system in mind as well."

The three state senators who represent the Hereford Zone have rejected the compromise solution proposed by Dance. In an April 4 letter, Senators James Brochin, J.B. Jennings and Joseph M. Getty said the compromise unfortunately would "create two separate learning environments within the same school." And since Hereford students have been able "to reach the highest level of academic effort by the current system," the senators continued in the letter to 'implore you not to create two learning environments in the same school and not to remove the present schedule."