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# Mercier: Time to close dark chapter for school district

**Keith Mercier Guest Columnist**

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“Not credible.” These two very important words were found on page 67 of the 119-page independent investigation on sexual harassment by the assistant superintendent and the handling of those claims by the superintendent.

These words were not used to describe the claims by the victim, which were sustained with sufficient evidence by the investigator. The independent investigator used the words “not credible” to describe the testimony of our current superintendent, Dr. Todd Bowden.

The superintendent was interviewed three times over two months and, more importantly, he was under oath. “Not credible.”

It gets worse.

“Misleading.” This word was found on page 85 of the report, used to describe the superintendent’s remarks to the School Board on the investigation at a public meeting on June 18.

“The greater weight of the evidence suggests that Bowden knew or should have known that his remarks about the investigation (as quoted above) were not completely accurate and could be misleading.”

These troubling findings — “not credible” and “misleading” — should send chills up everyone’s spine, but the School Board majority should be rattled to their core.

Bowden is in charge of educating, protecting and caring for our kids. He’s in charge of leading our teachers and staff. He’s in charge of implementing the stated vision of the School Board, which includes enabling students to lead responsible lives. Is this responsible?

These findings go beyond any bad judgment or the finding that Bowden’s actions played a primary role in the district’s failure to address the claims of sexual harassment, hostile work environment, retaliation and threatening behavior.

These findings speak to the superintendent's character.

Is this who we want in charge of our future?

We have hope for our kids in this district because of staff members like the harassment victim.

She is a single mother who depended on her income to support her family. She is a woman who was held hostage in her position by her harasser so he could continue to prey upon her.

A harassment victim who witnessed the contract renewal of her harasser while the School Board member who knew what was happening stayed silent.

A woman who listened to the glowing reviews of the majority School Board members during the evaluation of the superintendent who not only failed to protect her, but misled the board and gave sworn testimony about his failures that was not credible.

A woman who was forced to work for weeks under her harasser after he was told she complained.

A woman whom the superintendent made a target of the investigation.

She is strong, brave and, as parents and taxpayers, we owe her a lot. We would have never known how very bad the state of this administration was if it weren't for her fortitude.

We find great comfort in people like her who work in our school system as teachers and staff, knowing that they are playing a significant role in caring for our children.

But if action is not taken now, this superintendent will take the entire district down with him.

The superintendent's conduct is becoming a common practice within the district — and it is evidenced from the findings of yet another independent party outside of the sexual harassment investigation, an administrative law judge.

Even worse, these findings directly relate to the welfare and education of a student.

An Oct. 21 Division of Administrative Hearing 109-page order found that the school district "failed to provide an appropriate education to a student for over six years." While this started under a different administration, the cover-up happened under Bowden. You know, the same one who was found not credible in sworn testimony and publicly misled the School Board.

“Altered.” The Administrative Hearing order labeled this next finding “disturbing.” On page 68, the order found that in 2018, “data collected was altered by the aide and school ESE and District staff.” The School District was justifying a desired outcome showing “deliberate indifference in the education of the student.”

Expanding upon the “altered” data in the findings, the administrative judge explained how pervasive the cover-up was. The order further found on page 69 “... staff conduct related to such misrepresentations was systemic in the District ...”

Let that sink in. “Systemic” used to describe “misrepresentations” within the district relating to the welfare and education of a student.

We are at a crossroads for the future of our school district. It’s time to close this dark chapter in School Board administration, start the healing and regain the trust of parents and taxpayers.

The majority School Board members need to end this, regain control of a district that has lost its moral compass and, most of all, protect our kids, teachers and staff.

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