



Trustee Slams FUSD Admin for ‘Sanitizing’ Info, Tardy Responses

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By

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Fresno Unified Trustee Susan Wittrup says the district’s administration needs to respond more quickly to trustee queries, and not “sanitize” information by putting a positive spin on it.

Wittrup’s comments came during the board-superintendent communication portion of Wednesday’s School Board meeting.

She prefaced her remarks by praising the district staff and School Board members as smart and supportive people “who want the best for kids.”

But Wittrup, who was elected in November to represent the Bullard region and is the board’s newest trustee, went on to slam the administration for hamstringing trustees by holding up information that keeps them from making informed decisions in a timely fashion.

Wittrup listed a number of queries she has made –including about Wawona Middle School, campus assistant training, and late buses at Computech Middle School –that have gone unanswered or have been incompletely answered.

Fresno Unified Must Find the Courage to Change: Wittrup

“I know that there are cultural barriers to progress that exist in bureaucratic systems like public school districts that must be made conscious and intentionally changed,” she said. “... There is also a culture around sanitizing information so that it sounds more positive and/or completely ignoring the specific information requested. This is a cultural mindset specific to Fresno Unified, and it needs to change.”

“The correct mindset should be an urgency orientation towards open communication and having the courage – and it does take courage – to face the sometimes ugly facts of situations so that we can move rapidly to improve the educational outcomes for our students.”

Wittrup then made a motion to set a 10-day deadline for the administration to respond to queries from trustees, or a progress report on responses within that time period. There was no second to the motion, and board counsel Bryan Martin came to the podium to caution the board against any such vote, which he said could violate the Brown Act that requires public notice of board actions.

He suggested that the matter could be referred to the board bylaws committee, which was scheduled to meet this week.

Teachers Cheer Trustee’s Effort

Wittrup’s comments were quickly hailed by the Fresno Teachers Association in a Facebook post.

Commenter Meg Wunder referenced Superintendent Bob Nelson’s oft-repeated credo of “militant positivity” when she posted “Militant Positivity dismisses the true needs of our staff, students and families. It’s time FUSD addresses the real issues instead of covering everything with a layer of icing and sprinkles.”

Nelson responded Friday morning through an email from district spokeswoman Nikki Henry:

“Providing formal responses to any Trustee’s inquiry in a timely manner is absolutely important. We believe 10 days, or an update as to why the response may take longer, is certainly reasonable. Today, the board bylaw subcommittee will take that up in their meeting and formalize a timeline for formal requests.

The comments regarding sanitizing information are a bit more complex. We can take the Computech transportation issues as an example. Generally speaking, our community is interested in the issue being fixed, not understanding the minutia of the complexities resulting in the issue. Understandably so. In that situation, there are contract implications that have to be worked through collaboratively with our labor partners and that takes time. We know how easily that level of granular detail can be taken by the media and presented in a way that suggests strife with labor when there is none, where some may see that as blaming unions for issues when again that isn’t the case. It does not help us to solve the problem faster, which is what our students and parents deserve from us. Does that make for a sanitized record? Maybe. However, we don’t want to further slow down the

resolution, come off as defensive, or try to make excuses to our community. Another example that could be seen as sanitizing, is that we, by law, cannot share sensitive personnel information in a Board Communication. Those discussions are confidential and available to Trustees, just not in a Board Communication format.”

Changing a Culture That Accepts Failure

Wittrup told GV Wire on Friday that her statement at the board meeting was her opening salvo in her battle to change the “culture that perpetuates failure.”

“Culture isn’t something you fix. Rather, cultural change is what you get after you’ve put new structures in place to tackle the tough challenges, like reworking outdated strategies. So by fixing the system, the culture will adjust,” she said.

The structure that Wittrup says needs fixing includes the slow or nonresponses and the district’s tendency to put a positive spin on issues regardless of the facts. This behavior creates a reluctance to acknowledge and address failures – or make proactive recommendations for improvement.

Wittrup said she is a firm believer that Fresno Unified could benefit from following the lead of other large urban school districts where students are achieving success. That pathway is spelled out in a June 2021 report by the Council of Great City Schools, “Mirrors or Windows: How Well Do Large City Public Schools Overcome the Effects of Poverty and Other Barriers?”

“There are nine common characteristics that those school districts share that they have employed to raise their students out of the low achievement they started with,” she said. “And it’s pretty dramatic, and there is no reason for us to reinvent the wheel. I would like to replicate a lot of these nine characteristics of the other districts and how they’ve been successful in transforming their district.”

The report said those characteristics include setting high standards and providing instructional guidance and support as well as instituting accountability systems.