

State scolds Gallup-McKinley's Board of Education

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Skandera ready to lower the boom on Gallup

The New Mexico Department of Public Education appears adamant that the Gallup-McKinley County School Board comes up with a corrective action plan to right its past and current shortcomings. The premise was outlined in an Aug. 22 letter from Paul Aguilar, deputy secretary of finance and operations at PED, to School Board President Priscilla Manuelito.

“In an open meeting on Aug. 15, discussion around the Johnson O’Malley Program Agreed Upon procedures report resulted in the board stating they do not accept or ‘honor’ the report because the board did not approve of the auditor and claimed that the auditor is biased,” Aguilar wrote. “The findings identified in the report are very concerning to the department. It is particularly concerning of the board’s unwillingness to accept a report that clearly identifies internal control issues as well as allegations of fraud, waste and abuse.”

Aguilar went on to say that an action plan made by the McKinley school district is due within 30 days. The school board met Aug. 24 in a closed session, allegedly to discuss, among other things, Superintendent Frank Chiapetti’s contract.

No action was taken after a marathon four-hour meeting that was attended by more than 100 people.

Contacted this week, board member Joe Menini, a retired Gallup educator, said the entire board is set to meet Sept. 2 at the district office, along with the board’s attorneys, to discuss several matters.

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Johnson O'Malley is a financial supplemental assistance program to aid Native American students.

"The letter is pretty clear," Menini said. "I am hopeful that something comes out of our meeting this week."

But the agenda for the Sept. 2 meeting lists only one item – a closed-session discussion centered on the superintendent.

The agenda states: "Limited Personnel Matters Related to supervision of Superintendent; presentation of evaluation of the Superintendent; consideration of complaint from Superintendent and discussion on the employment contract of the Superintendent."

SKANDERA GETS INVOLVED

In a separate correspondence, state Secretary of Education Hanna Skandera sent a terse one-page letter dated Aug. 24 to the five members of the Gallup-McKinley County School Board of Education.

In the letter, Skandera wrote, "My office has received a number of complaints regarding the Gallup-McKinley County School Board. These complaints have come from numerous sources, including the city of Gallup [Mayor], a state Senator, a state Representative, district staff, the local business community and other concerned community members."

Skandera said the list of complaints regarding the board includes: overstepping its authority in regards to the day-to-day affairs of the district; interfering in personnel matters; rolling quorums; violating the open-meetings act; and serious financial mismanagement.

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Skandera wrote that she is aware of alleged wrongdoings that include a school-board member serving who does not live in the district; board members harassing district staffers; and a board member who attended a conference and requested reimbursement for expenses, even though that board member did not attend the conference as a representative of the McKinley district.

“The authority of the school board and its members are defined in state statute,” she wrote. “As a result, I am directing the School Board to undergo training specific to its roles and responsibilities. This training must be completed within 60 days with documentation of attendance provided by the New Mexico School Boards Association.”

Furthermore, Skandera wrote that failure to meet the directive could lead her office to take action and indefinitely suspend the board. Such an action has not occurred in Gallup in recent memory.

Besides Menini and Manuelito, members of the school board include Vice President Kevin Mitchell, Secretary Lynn Huenemann, and board member Sandra Jeff. Jeff is a former member of the New Mexico House of Representatives and the newest member of the board. Originally from Crownpoint, Jeff has been accused of residing in the Albuquerque area.

Board member Huenemann said he received the two pieces of correspondence, but he's not exactly sure how Aguilar and Skandera gathered the information contained in the letters.

“I was never interviewed by anybody as far as the contents of the letters go,” Huenemann said. “How did they get the information in which the contents of the letters are based?”

As of press time, neither Mitchell nor Manuelito, the board's president, returned phone calls seeking comment.

The Sept. 2 Board of Education meeting starts at 1:30 pm, 640 Boardman Dr.

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