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Calvert County Board of Education Executive Staff and School Board Members

1305 Dares Beach Road

Prince Frederick, MD 20678

Dear Calvert County BoE Executive Staff and Board Members:

Before our complaint was received on Monday, 4/16, we warned Sarah that she might be subject to intimidation and/or inquiry and we provided her with letters demanding that no one speak to her and to have her call us. We also provided her with incident reports to fill out, sign and timestamp. At 11:45 on Monday, 4/23 Sarah texted to tell us that Ms. Blackmon had just stopped her and spoken to her in the lunchroom.  John and I arrived at Southern Middle at around 12:45, went to the front office and asked to speak with Mrs. Blackmon.  We were asked if we had an appointment and if she would know what the subject was.  We responded that we were sure Ms. Blackmon was aware and that we were happy to wait until she was available.  While waiting in the front entry, Mr. Mister walked by us.  We were glowering at him, and I informed him not to speak to Sarah again.  He protested that he had not and said he didn't know what we were talking about, at one point asking if we wanted to meet with him.  We said yes and that we were waiting for Mrs. Blackmon.  I also told him after five months of avoiding Sarah he should not start speaking to her now and that we were letting him know.  He then went into the office.  A few minutes later we heard a woman's voice asking Mr. Mister for his location, coming from someone's walkie talkie down the hall.  We did not see Mr. Mister at any point afterward.  A few minutes after that, we were called into the office, and we announced to Ms. Blackmon that we were recording the conversation.  Our demeanor throughout the entire period of time was strident and insistent.  We were reasonable, but did not attempt to conceal our anger, disgust and frustration.  When Ms. Blackmon asked us to leave, we left. Why, after five months, did Ms. Blackmon pick that day to talk to Sarah?  She was wearing a new shirt; however, we suspect this was not simple coincidence and wanted to make the point that she will not face any retribution or questions after the months of abuse and dishonesty, and that we will be the only points of contact for anyone who wishes to speak with her.  After we stated in our complaint that no one may contact Sarah, it is our fear that this was a method of intimidation where plausible deniability would exist. Neither Mandy Blackmon nor Travis Mister may speak to her again, and we do not trust their motives.

This is a small-town community, and with the benefits of that, people know each other. Ten complaints were sent, and we have no idea the extent to which they may have been disseminated from there. All it would have taken would be for one even well-intended or concerned individual to contact Ms. Blackmon or Mr. Mister and tell them anything about the complaint. After avoiding Sarah and her representatives’ concerns as Mandy Blackmon and Travis Mister have for an entire year, on the many levels for which administrators are actually and fundamentally responsible, Ms. Blackmon suddenly cares enough to compliment Sarah on her shirt, when she has never paid her a compliment or addressed her like that before? On Monday, 4/23, a week after the complaint was received by the BoE? The one sort of comment she could have made to Sarah which could be plausibly deniable under inquiry? To call out her name in a serious and intimidating tone, pause and wait for Sarah to stop walking, and then sweetly say she liked her shirt? Why the sudden and off-putting contrast in tone? Perhaps it was an unfortunate coincidence. So, under that logic, and after failing and undermining Sarah on so many levels throughout the year, this is the encouragement she provides? A cheap compliment from someone whose integrity and sincerity are constantly suspect to Sarah and her family, even if Ms. Blackmon did not know about the complaint? Mandy Blackmon does not have the right to think she can suddenly ingratiate herself with Sarah or query anyone, after what she has allowed and done.

On Wed., 4/25, Spanish teacher Ms. Adams informed her class that her computer had been wiped out during a repair/update and she had to hurry to find another class warmup lesson. Perhaps there are more options, but the ones we currently consider are the following:

* CCPS are investigating, and we hope, intent on preserving evidence and dedicated to transparency
* Repair/update was regular/necessary, incidental to any other circumstances
* It is known from our complaint that computer was used to inform that Sarah Blevins and Skyler Johnson were “spreading rumors” and “gossiping,” which resulted in Ms. Goldstein removing the girls from class and Ms. Adams lecturing the class upon the girls’ return, and a person/people are making whatever possible efforts to conceal evidence.

We are filing our first FOIA request this evening regarding all electronic communications. If we learn that anyone has wittingly attempted to even advise the concealment of evidence of this or anything else, we will pursue any and all legal avenues to ensure they are held accountable. Why should Sarah feel safe in an environment where we have become so distrustful as to believe there is a possibility of a coverup, after having stated our intentions tonight? If said possibility is true, it is just such a lack of integrity and ethics that has allowed this mess at Southern to flourish. We need to find out the truth as soon as possible, and we will not stop until we know we have the facts. Any and all transparency, expediency and full assistance to clarify this matter would assuage some of our concerns, and we ask that you provide that to us, so if our fears are unfounded, we can acknowledge it and move on to other things.

We are honest people. While we assure that any actions we might be forced to take will be honest, reasonable and necessary to achieve our goals, we are open to pursuing consequences which would only ever be entirely or in part symbolic and beneficial to the schools; commensurate with how much we continue to worry about this problem and the financial costs, effort and stress associated. If this is allowed to continue, other parents are going to continue be made aware, and it could end up with a parent who might be interested only in the opportunity of financial benefit. We do not want things to go this far, and know it would hurt everyone; however, we are committed to whatever will force this situation to a satisfactory conclusion that ensures a safe and honest educational environment, for the long term. We do not see this as an opportunity for personal financial enrichment; rather, it is for all of our children and their peers’ and teachers’ educational enrichment – how many parents might have children who have had experiences similar to Sarah’s, or as we fear, perhaps worse? How many children who might have been hurt, and whose parents finally see an avenue for remuneration? How many kids have not had their parents advocating for them, and what have they endured? Ms. Blackmon’s comments about female promiscuity implied that because some girls are promiscuous, that whatever happens to anyone is fair game. Was she insinuating the few girls, so outnumbered in the gym class to which Sarah had been assigned at the beginning of the year, and perhaps even Sarah, might sexually harass their male classmates and I should worry about that, simply to get a parent off her back? This should make anyone who hears it absolutely sick and terrified for what may have happened and could happen in the future. Is this what she really feels and how she regards her students, if only the females? How dare she imply that it is not her responsibility to do better for all boys and girls, including any girls who might be motivated to act out and pursue sexually inappropriate behaviors, not to mention any teacher who might be saddled with such a predicament? Maybe there is a reason some girls are, which is deserving of compassion and discipline, instead of the contempt I heard in her voice. Her statements were and are sickening, demonstrate a fundamental absence of decency and should not be permitted to exist in an educational environment.

If any of the people whom we have mentioned detect even the slightest hint of retribution (we know all whom we have so far mentioned and might at any point be inclined to mention to be honest people) we will see it as an avenue of pursuit to ensure respect, transparency and integrity for the teachers, staff, administration and students at Southern Middle and commit some or all of the resources we are capable of expending to assist them. Mandy Blackmon and Travis Mister consistently transfer blame to others and are content to abuse teachers even in front of their students. The students know they do not have to respect their teachers and staff when even their principals do not feel the need. In fact, both overtly and covertly, Mandy Blackmon and Travis Mister appear to *try* *to repel* students, teachers, parents and staff on almost every level. How else might one explain how Travis Mister regularly stares at walls and dodges any interaction to avoid contact and why he does things like asking a large group of students how they would like their pasts dug into, when they only were asking for his support after being faced with dishonest bullying accusations and threatening and impossible learning conditions? Many of the staff, teachers and students cringe at having to deal with them and avoid them if at all possible.

The BoE needs to start listening to their teachers, staff and administrators. If Sarah’s educators are not supported, how will she and her peers be supported? Why should teachers devote themselves to careers which pay less than what many professionals with similar educations and who put in similar effort can earn, only to have their spirits crushed? Caring educators, aside from working hard, give so much of themselves. How can they give when they do not receive the respect and voice they deserve? How will this happen? One suggestion - and which surely would demonstrate a good faith desire and intent to hear Southern’s administrators, teachers and staff and repair their working conditions – would be to hold a series of private meetings at varying times considered generally convenient to most, where only they and the BoE and any Staff whose positions pertain, from the Superintendent down, attend. The meetings would need to be advertised at least one week in advance of the first, to be open only for all employed at Southern, be it substitute, part or full-time, and should require attendance by no fewer than one BoE elected official, and Superintendent Curry, Asst. Superintendent Workman and Executive Director Navarro, with sufficient, comfortable seating and climate provided. Please keep in mind that being a small community, and in South County, some employed at Southern may fear even more rejection and manipulation and still may not wish to attend. Show them you care, that things are changing and that you’ll stay and listen to them as long as they need. Establishing relationships of respect, understanding, forgiveness, communication, growth, trust, and being able to admit when one is mistaken or wrong are all fundamental tenets of education.

This burden cannot be placed on any of the already beaten down and overburdened employees at Southern or be to the detriment of other schools in the County. From our perspective, there will be some necessary and worthwhile financial costs associated with repairing this problem as quickly as possible, for as long as it takes. This includes doing what it takes to locate new leadership for the school but not from any other County schools, and cannot be at the expense of any well-deserved pay or benefits that employees receive or expect in the future. It also includes hiring a highly qualified and unconflicted independent educational consultant to conduct a full evaluation before the end of this year, and retaining the same consultant to review by the end of the first quarter of the 2018-2019 school year to make a report on Southern’s status and areas where improvement is needed and what should remain the same. Each report should be distributed to all Southern employees.

[www.calvertedudocs.com](http://www.calvertedudocs.com) We would prefer that the problems at Southern be dealt with swiftly and with the resources, integrity, responsibility, consideration, respect and urgency deserved. If they are not, we will find it immediately necessary to begin expending time and resources to obtain and analyze all possible records regarding Southern Middle School, and the BoE. We will scan all records, and place them on the website for public viewing. From there, and because we feel that Southern Middle has been unfairly targeted to be a repository for troubled students from other schools, which, given the comparatively disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances of some South County residents, causes Southern an even greater struggle, we will then focus on records for other South County schools. After that, we will move to more northern schools. The website will contain any and all reasonably vetted documents obtained/received - good, bad, ugly and indifferent. All information will be properly redacted and presented, we expect all FOIA products to be provided the same and we will prepare press releases and develop media contacts. We are also beginning to look at what action we might take with the State BoE.

We are worried that our efforts might have an undesirable impact on our children (aside from the impact it would have on our family life) in that anyone who hears the name “Blevins” will be afraid to hold our children to account if they misbehave or need other guidance. We still hope and expect that our children will be held to reasonable and fair standards, dependent entirely on what they earn, deserve and need, and that they will never see any less directed by any employee of CCPS toward any other employee or student. We also hope no teachers or students will ever be forced, let alone bullied, into having to tolerate such behavior as they endure at Southern and other schools, and for many of them every day. Administrators and officials at any level who refuse to levy and allow reasonable consequences to be levied betray other administrators, teachers, staff and students.

Toward that end, we have been, as stated in the supporting documents of our email exhibits in our initial complaint, aware that policy and law beyond Calvert County’s control have, in some part, contributed to problems which adversely affect everyone at County schools. As well intended as new educational policies often are, any policy which advocates to allow misbehavior and abuse in the schools without reasonable and appropriate consequences hurts everyone. Anything that might be encouraged to demonstrate the need to adhere to the Code of Conduct and Student Behavior Response Guidelines, or which we might do to assist another person, group or organization, which point to areas of improvement beyond Calvert County, is something we would much rather be a part of and which would be a more satisfying and global solution. But, we will do what we can to force improvement from within the County if these problems are not fixed.

It is our hope that, after our complaint and this letter and meeting tonight, CCPS comes to what we believe to be certain inevitable conclusions and that immediate preparations will be made to suspend Mandy Blackmon and Travis Mister (pending a full, independent and unconflicted outside investigation and recommendation), to locate a certified Spanish teacher for Sarah’s Spanish class for the remainder of the year, to remove disruptive and abusive students to appropriate environments (where it is no more reasonable to allow teacher, staff and student abuse) and to organize at least five meetings, described as above, with a firm commitment to periodically, predictably, transparently and similarly reconvene to continue hearing from those employed at Southern Middle School.

Sincerely,

John Blevins Katharine Blevins

Cc: Dr. Susan Johnson, Director of Secondary School Improvement

Ms. Kim Roof, Director of Student Services