As Controversies Swirl, What’s Next for Burlington Schools’ Beleaguered Superintendent?

BY MOLLY WALSH

The Burlington School Board recited a greeting that offered peace, friendship and love before the public comment period began at its regular meeting on September 13.

The message failed to pacify the audience. Instead, a crowd of parents, residents and students dubbed the board and Superintendent Yaw Obeng for their handling of complaints against Burlington High School guidance director Mario Macias and a related student newspaper censorship case.

Throughout the barrage, Obeng listened attentively. He wore a business suit and something else, too: a calm expression that betrayed no indication that the blistering critique was getting to him.

Obeng has been given ample opportunity to practice grace under fire in his three years on the job. As soon as one controversy sputters out, another seems to ignite in this public school system that educates about 3,700 students.

“If you’re not someone who can deal with conflict on a daily basis, this is not the role for you,” Obeng told Seven Days during an interview Monday.

But the superintendent is now facing one of his biggest challenges yet, from critics who say he has bungled the Macias situation and flunked an important leadership test. And it isn’t just angry parents complaining. Some board members are also deeply critical of the superintendent’s performance, according to emails obtained by Seven Days through a public records request.

One email refers to the Macias “debacle,” which led the district to put the guidance director, who earns $96,788 annually, on paid administrative leave on September 13. Another blasts Obeng for failing to remove Macias sooner, saying “you are accountable for his performance and the Board should hold you accountable.”

Obeng declined to comment on Macias, saying it was a personnel matter. “I hope that people know that we are listening,” he said. Despite the current upheaval, Obeng feels he’s made a difference for the better in Burlington. “I do enjoy my job,” he said. “I do enjoy challenges.”

They began to surface as soon as Obeng accepted the job. The school board went through lengthy machinations in 2015 to obtain a visa to allow Obeng, a Canadian citizen, to serve as the first black superintendent of schools in Burlington. Newly hired, Obeng successfully sought an exemption from a local ordinance that requires department heads to live within city limits, so he could buy a house in South Burlington. Even though the city council has granted numerous exemptions, critics were incensed by the highly paid super’s decision to live in the burbs.

Then, in the summer of 2017, four members of the high school’s guidance department resigned, blaming Macias for creating a hostile work environment. When school began, teachers went on a four-day strike over pay and scheduling.

Months later, the board authorized a new, three-year contract that started July 1 and pays Obeng $161,019 this year. Then-board chair Mark Porter praised Obeng’s budgeting skills and his focus on improvements in special education and services to English language learners.

But the controversies continued. In January, Porter accused fellow board member Jeff Wick of racial bias for allegedly stating in a private conversation that the board had gone “too far in hiring district leadership of color.” Wick strongly denied the charge, and a private investigator did not substantiate bias.

In May, parents staged a mini-rebellion and claimed Obeng was pushing construction of two new preschool buildings without voter approval. The board ordered that the projects be put on hold.

The latest conflagration, involving Macias, is still raging. On September 10, BHS’ student newspaper, the Register, broke the news that the Vermont Agency of Education had cited Macias for alleged licensing violations, including faking a student transcript, behaving inappropriately with a substitute teacher and failing to understand the basic operations of the department.

The publication fought back, creating more district turmoil, after interim BHS principal Noel Green censored the story. Meanwhile, Macias denied the allegations and will make his case at an October 11 licensing panel hearing. His lawyer declined to comment.

But Burlington parents are talking.

“I was stunned at the brazenness of the behavior described and the seeming impunity under which it operated,” said David Lines, who read the education agency’s Macias affidavit.

Lines said he couldn’t be happier about his son’s experience at Burlington’s Sustainability Academy, but he’s less satisfied with Obeng’s performance. “I just think it’s been one controversy after another,” Lines said. “To me, it’s this overall attitude of arrogance.”

Others say the superintendent is dedicated, passionate about educating kids and tough enough to weather this latest storm.

“If he’s faced worse adversity than this,” said former board chair Porter, who did not run for reelection in March. “He’s done a good job. He’s done a good job listening to the community.”

While Porter remains a staunch supporter of the superintendent, board turnover means most of the people who hired Obeng are gone. Eight of the 12 current board members were not serving last year when complaints about Macias hit the media.

Porter said it’s unfair to suggest the
board in its former incarnation did nothing about Macias. “The public can only see one side of this” due to privacy rules, he said.

Liz Curry, a current board member who has served for five years, echoed that. “Nobody has the full story,” she said.

She and other board members contacted for this story declined to discuss Obeng’s performance, saying it would violate personnel rules. The board is charged with hiring and firing the district superintendent.

But the emails obtained by Seven Days show that sharp disagreement over the handling of the Macias issue dates back at least a year. In August 2017, after the guidance counselors spoke out against their director, Obeng issued a statement that read, in part: “The Board, District and High School Administration stand strongly behind Director Macias.”

Wick emailed the superintendent on August 11 to say he objected to the statement, writing that he hadn’t been consulted before it went out.

“I do not support it because it is too one-sided, simply appears to ‘circle the wagons’, and is dismissive of the comments we heard from the former guidance counselors,” he wrote.

The board similarly rejected Obeng’s other attempts to quell concerns about Macias as the discussion continued over the next eight months.

In May, the superintendent sent board members an email about actions being taken with Macias, writing that “the Board Chair informed me that some Board Members may feel the district is not doing enough to respond to the questions raised about the guidance director.” The actions were redacted in the email obtained by this newspaper.

It was board member Keith Pillsbury who responded with the scathing email to Obeng that made note of comments we heard from the former guidance counselors,” he wrote.

The school board has set out a number of priorities for Obeng. One of them is to narrow the academic achievement gap among different student demographic groups, a deep-rooted problem across the nation. There’s little evidence of progress so far under Obeng’s leadership. The district’s most recent Equity & Inclusion Data Report, published last October, included data from Obeng’s first two years on the job.

It showed a decline in overall proficiency and the continuation of large gaps in standardized testing results, for example, between students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, and those who don’t.

Large disparities also remain among racial groups and between students who receive English language learner services and those who don’t, the report noted.

But data show significant progress when it comes to reducing suspensions, another priority set by the school board and by parents who have lobbied for less punitive discipline. Suspensions in the district fell from 409 to 368 between 2016 and 2017, according to the report.

Obeng described the drop as one of his accomplishments. He also cited his work to erase “a silo effect” in the system by encouraging school principals to think about what is best for the district, not just for the schools they lead.

So far, Obeng has managed to avoid the deficit problem that plagued former superintendent Jeanne Collins, who
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The ideas are preliminary and were discussed but not voted on, according to Wick, cochair of the subcommittee and vice chair of the board.

Several of the ideas, which Wick and board member Mike Fisher drafted, appear to move away from a philosophy of board management called policy governance that the board, in its former composition, adopted last year. That model calls for results-oriented monitoring but not close involvement in day-to-day operations.

Under the policy governance model, the old board abolished subcommittees. The new board voted to restore them earlier this year, but not without debate. Some of the longer-term board members, including Mark Barlow, opposed the move.

He’s wary of some of the board’s recent decisions, because they “represent a retreat back to board micro-management of district operations that have been delegated to the superintendent,” Barlow said via email.

Some observers, such as Tomczak, give Obeng credit for responding to what she sees as a new and better direction being set by the board. How Obeng will lead in the future, and how he will resolve the controversies at Burlington High School, is a matter of speculation.

The superintendent says he has more authority to work and hopes to move forward, with the board’s support, for another three years. “That’s my intention,” Obeng said. “I signed a contract.”

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Vermont Lawmakers Question Unspent Money and Untreated Inmates

Vermont legislators are questioning why so few inmates receive hepatitis C treatment, and they’re demanding to know what happened to $2.2 million of state money that was designated for prison health care.

The state’s chief health care advocate, Michael Fisher, told the Joint Legislative Justice Oversight Committee last Thursday that the Department of Corrections had only treated one inmate for hepatitis C in 2017.

Antiviral drugs can cure hepatitis C, an infectious disease that can lead to liver cancer and other potentially fatal complications. The virus, transmitted by blood, is more common among prisoners than the general population.

Ben Watts, the Department of Corrections’ health services director, suggested that an unspecified number of the roughly 250 inmates diagnosed with hepatitis C don’t stay in prison long enough to receive the drug, which is typically prescribed for an eight-week period.

According to Watts, the department has so far treated 10 people in 2018. Fisher also directed lawmakers’ attention to a significant amount of unspent money. In 2017, the Department of Corrections paid about $4.8 million to its private health care contractor, Centurion, for pharmaceuticals and outside medical expenses, according to information Fisher provided the committee. Centurion only spent about $2.6 million, however.

When Sen. Rex Sears (D-Bennington), who also sits on the Senate Appropriations Committee, asked corrections officials what happened to the remaining money, he didn’t get a clear answer at first. “I just find it appalling that you can’t account for $2 million,” he said.

An audience member helped him out. “Centurion keeps the money,” piped up Chloé White, policy director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Vermont.

Watts conceded the point. “We identified this issue in years one through three of the contract” with Centurion and changed it for 2018, he said.

Sears wasn’t satisfied. “I want it paid back if they took it,” he said of the missing money.

ALICIA FRESE

GOP County Chair Deletes Tweet That Said Kavanaugh Accuser ‘Was Having a Sexual Fantasy’

Orleans County Republican Party chair Chet Greenwood denied writing a tweet posted to his account that suggested one of the women accusing U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh of sexual assault was instead recalling a “sexual fantasy.”

Greenwood said he doesn’t know how the tweet appeared on his account but confirmed that he deleted it. “I don’t think I did that,” Greenwood said Monday. “I don’t know how that got there. And I saw that, and I deleted it. I don’t know. I can’t say how it got there. I deleted it.”

Christine Blasey Ford, a professor at Palo Alto University in Northern California, has said that Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her at a suburban Maryland party when she was 15 and Kavanaugh was 17.

Greenwood — or some unknown person using his account — was commenting on a post from conservative news site the Daily Caller, which pointed out that Ford had not provided many details about the alleged assault.

“I think Christine was having a sexual fantasy,” the full tweet read.

Reached by phone Monday, Greenwood said someone called him about the tweet Sunday afternoon, and he deleted it shortly afterward. “It took me 20 minutes to figure out how to delete a tweet, because I’ve never done it before,” said Greenwood, adding that he changed his account password after the incident.

Greenwood told Seven Days that he feels “bad for Christine Ford for holding this back for so many years.” The GOP county chair went on to accuse Senate Democrats of bringing up Fords allegations at a politically convenient time meant to disrupt Kavanaugh’s confirmation process.

Ford and Kavanaugh are scheduled to testify Thursday before the Judiciary Committee.

TAYLOR DOBBS

Leahy: Firing Rosenstein ‘Would Scream of Cover-Up’

As the fate of Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein hung in the balance on Monday, U.S. Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) said that firing the official overseeing the Special Counsel investigation into President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign would be “a bad mistake.”

“It would be very, very damaging — both to the president and to the Republican Party, because it would scream of cover-up,” said Leahy, the senior-most member of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Leahy made the remarks near the end of a day of furibous speculation over whether Rosenstein would offer his resignation or Trump would fire him. His status has been uncertain since last Friday, when the New York Times reported that Rosenstein had suggested in the spring of 2017 that he wear a wire to record the president and seek Trump’s removal from office by invoking the 25th Amendment. The White House said Monday afternoon that Rosenstein remained at the Department of Justice but that he was scheduled to meet with the president on Thursday.

According to Leahy, firing Rosenstein could effectively end Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s probe of Russian interference in the 2016 election, because Rosenstein would be replaced as acting attorney general overseeing the inquiry by Solicitor General Noel Francisco, whom Leahy referred to as “a Trump acolyte.”

Leahy also responded Monday to a new allegation, reported Sunday by the New Yorker, that U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh exposed himself to a woman at a college party and forced her to touch his genitals. Kavanaugh has said that the events described by classmate Deborah Ramirez did not take place.

Asked whether he believed Ramirez’s account, Leahy said, “I don’t know, but I do know this: It just strengthens what I’ve been saying. Take the time to turn this over to independent investigators who are trained in this field.”

PAUL HEINTZ