

Community Members Speak Out During School Board Meeting

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Maggie Wall/KMXT

Morale among Kodiak's teachers is at an all-time low and communications within the district and with parents leaves a lot to be desired.

Those were just a few of the concerns expressed by residents who spoke during Public Comment periods during last night's regular meeting of the Kodiak Island Borough School District Board of Education.

The meeting was the first since the recent contract and performance review of Kodiak School District Superintendent Stewart McDonald.

The Borough Assembly Chambers was packed, though only a few people spoke publicly about a problem. References were made by those who did speak that teachers and other school district employees fear that speaking out publicly would adversely affect their employment with the district.

Anticipating what was coming, School Board President Katie Oliver spoke to the issue shortly after the meeting got underway:

"It's also my recommendation and intent to schedule at a near future public meeting, a discussion item about the process of inviting and accepting public input into the evaluation of district employees...I think it's important to honor the time and energy that community members put into correspondence with the district and I think we can bring clarity to the process, particularly in the area of timeline and in the area of the goals that the board sets, which provides a framework for evaluation. And I think we can have a conversation about the extent to which we consider written comments that are anonymous and unsigned. So as your president, that is my intent and recommendation -- future executive session, future discussion item on the process."

Ron Gibbs was the first to speak. He said he did not come to the meeting to attack or tear down, but rather to make suggestions on how the district might handle what he called an increasing opportunity for improvement.

"We value the commitment that you have made, and respect the efforts that you make on behalf of the district. Unfortunately, comments made by board members do indicate a disconnect between the board's perceptions and what is actually happening in the schools in the community."

Gibbs added that the school board's bylaws hinder communications and frustrate the public by blocking direct access to

school board members.

Mary Forbes is one of those who is frustrated with the lack of access to school board members—especially the option of privately expressing concerns.

“For me, one of the most confusing things is can you define the difference between speaking to an individual board member and the board as a body. For me some frustration has resulted from the fact that I thought I was having confidential conversations via email or verbal with a board member, and then I find out that perhaps my conversation was emailed to the superintendent, or summarized in email to the superintendent. And I wasn't happy to find that out. I don't understand why if we want to communicate with the board we have to do it through the superintendent. You know sometimes people bypass the superintendent for a variety of reasons and you know it goes counter to why they are contacting you if you turn around and tell him everything we said to you. And also I think, as Mr. Gibbs said, whether you believe it is justified or not, there is perception in the community that if people speak up about these concerns there will be negative consequences. So there's a lot of people here that aren't willing to speak.”

One current school teacher did step forward to speak last night. Cid Blase said she is about to retire so there is no fear factor for her speaking out.

“When I wrote this today I was pretty angry and tonight I'm really sad to be standing here saying this. My name is Cid Blase I've been a teacher for 24 years and in Kodiak for 17 years. I am here speaking tonight because I am retiring in less than five weeks so the fear factor of being honest in public is greatly reduced. I'm here because I love teaching. The best hours of my day are spent with my students. Students are the reason we teach. I am also here because I respect the coworkers I am leaving behind and I know they cannot speak tonight for fear of retaliation by administration. I'm also speaking for students that told me their distressful stories of ruined GPAs because of changing the grading system at the high school in the middle of last year and not being prepared for college math, and while they talked to administrators about these concerns, no one listened. I'm here because I met parents that are afraid to speak their concerns for fear of retaliation against their children. This may seem extreme but this is how people feel.”

Last night was the final meeting for the Coast Guard representative on the school board. Commander Michael Mullen shared his perspective as he offered words of support to Superintendent McDonald and to everyone involved with the schools.

“Stewart you have a big target on you, and I'm sorry, because you have a very big heart as well. The work that you do here is tough. And I think that the best way to make sure that that work continues and goes forward is us as a school board working together with you and you working together with your staff, and involving the community in that process. I think the best way to get through any type of budget challenge or difficulty within a small community like what we have here in Kodiak is to collaborate and work together.”

And finally, under Superintendent's Comments, McDonald invited the public to attend a question and answer session tonight in the Choral Pod.

“I think it will be a good evening set aside to ask questions and try to get to some things that people are curious about and maybe identify some things that people would like to know more about that we would have a format to come back and deal with deeper questions that can't be answered so quickly and easily. And that is scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m. And as always I will stay until the last person is done asking questions which I have done many times before.”

Tonight's meeting, again, will be from 6 to 8 in the Choral Pod.