

Response to June 27 Gov Council draft meeting minutes and July 18 agenda items
Council members,

I have struggled to formulate a calm response to the recording secretary's description of events in her draft minutes of the proceedings at the June 27 Governance Council meeting in which she reports action taken at the request of the Wausau School District administrative staff. With the respect that is due an elected officer there are several errors that shouldn't be allowed to stand by any oversight board entrusted with the responsibilities our Montessori families have placed with us.

Before we approve, on July 18, these minutes as an accurate depiction of what took place at that meeting I ask the Council to discuss several aberrations that those conducting the meeting, and the administrative staff member advising them, should surely have recognized.

Improper Conduct

The meeting was first rushed to the docket for no apparent reason, and then in the end rushed to a conclusion that countered the apparent outcome.

The most egregious offenses included a conclusion and adjournment lacking any respect for accepted rules of proper meeting conduct, and an attempt by our non-voting Council advisor to affect the outcome of a Governance Council action through questionable parliamentary tactics. Additionally the meeting included unclear presiding authority, a disordered conduct, and a wide diversion from its stated purpose. These breaches of professional conduct call into question what may be reported and acted on as the meeting's outcome.

The Governance Council Co-vice-president and the Secretary took turns conducting the meeting, and with no clear presiding officer it was unclear whose attention members were to secure in order to assert a turn to speak. Interruptions were rampant leading to an inability to address the points stated in the memorandum that served as the basis for calling the meeting, and conversation was allowed to range widely beyond the stated scope of the meeting. It's true that on one occasion early in the meeting, the recording secretary remonstrated me in a stern tone about interruptions (when I started to answer a question posed by one member), but thereafter no such reminders were made after any of the many disruptions by others. During the vote the motion itself was never stated and when asked to read it back the recording secretary could not.

We should all be bothered by the attempt on the part of the Council liaison to disallow, just prior to voting, the vote of a member participating via video conference after much discussion in which the member clearly had heard the proceedings, had followed the conversation, and had contributed frequently in her turn on the proceedings. Without anyone asking for it, our administrative liaison launched into a prepared presentation, complete with highlighted text and a pile of copies, to tell us how we should follow the example of another governing body rather than follow our own best judgment. Her conduct created the appearance that she had come prepared to challenge the board member's participation, presumably due to a strong interest in affecting the outcome of this vote.

The meeting concluded with a result that persons with any basic knowledge of proper parliamentary procedure would certainly recognize as jury-rigged, prejudiced (in its literal sense)

and predetermined. In my prepared statement I mentioned "Calvin Ball," a game where the rules constantly change until Calvin somehow wins, and the bizarre series of votes was a perfect example of that. With a very deliberative roll call vote taken and the motion failed, I then attempted to offer a reasonable path for the board to move forward including an offer to schedule, as this body wished, a special election to find the chief executive replacement I so frequently had reminded you would be needed when my time came to an end. The meeting then erupted into what can only be described as hysterical cacophony with one member giving me an apparent boot from her friendship circle, one of the presiding officers characterising my offer as further "maneuvering and manipulation", and then at the height of hysteria with the recording secretary asking "does anyone want to change their vote?" Without members having a chance to discuss, without the requisite motion and decision to reconsider the question, and without any clear presiding officer to bring the meeting to order, the recording secretary simply changed one member's vote, and within minutes the meeting was adjourned. Curiously, the board's non-voting liaison was silent at this turn of events.

These draft minutes themselves tell a story of determined intent at a desired outcome with phrases like "not sufficient votes to pass", then "Kevin's vote was eliminated. And there still isn't enough votes to carry the vote", and finally "there were now sufficient votes". Then for one of the presiding officers to lead members to interpret my suggestion for moving forward as "manipulation" and the other to solicit a vote switch after a properly conducted vote is both unfair and improper leadership conduct.

Anyone with board leadership experience knows there is a procedure for reconsideration of a vote that requires a "motion to reconsider" to be voted on by the entire body. If that motion is successful, that is if the board decides a new vote is warranted, an invitation is required by the chair for additional discussion on the original motion, followed by a polling again of the entire body's vote based on any new information that comes forward in the required discussion period. The reason for this procedure is plain to see. The body must have oversight on the purpose behind the re-vote. If anyone can change their vote at will, what would keep the unsuccessful side in any close vote from offering questionable incentive to secure the changed vote. Imagine if the tables were turned and the vote had gone in favor of the action. Should I have loudly complained that we were being manipulated into such an unfair action? I could make an argument for that. Could I have staged a confusing personal tirade? Or pulled aside a member or two to "make a deal"? None of these are in my bag of available responses, nor would I have ever considered them. I have always done my best to keep our proceedings even-handed, deliberative and fair. These proceedings were 1) not conducted according to proper procedure, were 2) extremely unethical, were 3) downright mean-spirited, and were 4) executed with more "unprofessionalism" than anything I was (falsely) accused of. The minutes as proposed speak for themselves. For our own dignity as a hypothetically "professional" council I don't believe any of us should recognize or legitimize the bizarre and heavily manipulated results of the that moving-target vote.

In high school we all probably read Arthur Miller's story of "The Crucible" where John Proctor refuses to confess to wrongdoing (witchcraft) even to save his life because his name and reputation matter. If protecting my reputation against this determined effort is maneuvering, then I ask: would any of you act differently if facing this onslaught of overblown accusations and

administrative overreach of a remedy? Then, having successfully defended myself, why would it appear "manipulative" of me to recognize that I had become a focus of criticism, and to offer a conciliatory gesture allowing the board to move forward with the work of "making Montessori great again"?

Rather than taking corrective action we have further mired ourselves in a pit of misinformation, mistaken motives and misdeeds. We have answered accusations of misconduct by piling on even more offensive conduct. We owe it to ourselves, and to our children, to take real corrective action and to determine a reasonable path to come together to cross the divide to work on the demanding issues before us.

I challenge each and every board member to think outside of the happenings in their child's classroom and picture the successes of the school as a whole. For the past school year, and despite the fact that WAMCS hired two new teachers and a "principal" new to an oddly configured position, the positivity of the survey results is indicative of a school climate of which we should be proud. Furthermore, while Montessori doesn't place emphasis on test results, we can also note test scores as distinct measures of progress and success

Plan of Action

As a board we are divided; some might think intentionally. We owe it to our children to reject this manner of operating. We are here at this crossroads and need to choose wisely on our next turn. Only we can fix this impasse.

We could argue about the outcome and legality of the July 27 vote, whether it ended for or against the motion, or whether it followed accepted practices of meeting conduct. Ask yourselves: would such mangling of parliamentary procedure have been tolerated and the results legitimized during a Wausau School District Board of Education meeting? We could examine the actions of administrative or board personnel, or discuss the simple unfairness of it all. But the school is too important to all of us to let this fundamental disagreement over leadership keep us from moving forward with the important work of operating this school with a clear eye on our Montessori mission. It's up to us to fix what's keeping us from doing that. How could we live with ourselves if we stand by without administering a remedy, letting our kids suffer because of this?

I again propose we schedule, as the first order of business at the July 18 meeting, an election for President of the Council. I am not sure why there is resistance to such a move, but surely for us to operate with co-chairs as presiding officers would continue the confusion of June 27 and then leave leadership moves open to disagreement. Many boards operate with dual vice chairs to spread the work around, but few operate with the ambiguous and uncertain authority of dual chief executives. A web search for something like "having two presidents" yields fruitful discussion on this issue.

This is no "back room deal." I'm putting this right out in front of the 9 of us as a healing step that will move us forward with the challenges we face. We can then take up the important business of the Council.

We should also choose to properly reconsider, and to correct the record of the June 27 vote. If we forgo this step my position will be that the legitimate 5-4 vote stands and the "corrective action" has failed. Those with clear interest in a different outcome will not be happy at this suggestion, but again I ask you to consider the unfairness and the unusual manner in which the reported vote was conducted.

Additionally I believe we need to take measures to deal with the root cause of the issues we have been facing - the differences in operational approach between our board and district administrative staff. Consultation with Department of Public Instruction charter school oversight personnel confirms that WAMCS is not functioning as a charter school according to their standards the way the DPI intended charter schools and their governing boards to operate. Those are the facts. It isn't "unprofessional" for me to point that out. Any council members who think I'm mistaken have not taken the time or met our official responsibility as school leaders to understand charter school law. WAMCS should have a healthy partnership with the Wausau School District which doesn't have to be fraught with confrontation and controversy. But good fences make good neighbors. Without settling the differences between DPI charter school standards and how the Wausau School District is operating this school we face the prospect of continued conflict over operational authority regardless of how we establish council leadership for the near future.

To whomever we recognize as presiding officer, I therefore request the following three items be placed on the agenda for action on July 18.

1. Action item to vote on new leadership.

Motion: Move to schedule an election to install clear leadership and presiding authority as Governance Council President

2. Action item to properly, rationally reconsider the vote on the motion that failed the two thirds requirement with 5 for and 4 against.

Motion: Move to reconsider the June 27 vote on the motion by Kim Casey to "go to a vote to have Kevin Keeffe step down as the sitting president of the WAMCS due to misconduct."

3. Action item to retain professional mediation between the Council and WSD administrative staff before the beginning of the 2017-18 school year.

Motion: Due to the challenges of continuing operational disagreements, move to seek to engage the Wausau School District Administrative Team in talks, with a mediator approved by this Council, to resolve conflicting interpretations of Wisconsin Charter School law and the contract between the Wausau School District Board of Education and the Wausau Area Montessori Charter School Governance Council, including but not limited to clarification of the contract terms "operator" and "instrumentality."

Please consider whether these steps might accomplish what is needed now. Kevin Keeffe
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