

Merton parents confront school board

Questions over
principal resignation
remain unanswered

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MERTON — Dozens of parents and staff gathered at the Merton Community School District School Board meeting Monday night to address the board and demand answers following the resignation of popular principal Becca Stein, who some parents say the school board is pushing out.

“When I look at my staff members, I think our staff and community would tell you that we want Becca Stein as our principal,” fourth-grade teacher Kristin Barth said to the board, which drew cheers and applause from the crowd.

Stein, who is the principal of Merton Primary School, announced her resignation to the board over a week ago but did not give provide a specific reason for her resignation. Stein has not responded to The Freeman’s requests for comment.

“I am very grateful for the opportunity to serve the students and families of the Merton community, and I am proud of the great work we did together,” Stein’s resignation letter says. “As my family embraces new personal and professional changes, please know we will always be connected with our Merton family and many fond memories.”

Community forum

On Monday, the School Board held a community forum which allowed members of the public to address the board and pose questions to them and allowed the board to respond.

Stein’s resignation was a concern for most of the parents and staff who spoke, as well as how the board plans to fill Stein’s position and how the board plans to address staffing in the district, which speakers say will be worsened by Stein’s resignation.

“When we have someone who truly cares about our children, I just don’t understand why we would let that go,” a parent said. “I’m sure it’s tough to find good principals.”

Stein has been with the school for over three years.

“I did my homework on Ms. Stein (when I applied to teach here). I did my homework on Ron (Superintendent Ron Russ) and I guess I was a little too naive and didn’t think to do my homework on the board and what they value when it comes to Merton Schools,” said Barth, who said she is new in the district. “...I’m greatly concerned that the ultimate values that this board is looking for in a leader may not align with my own, and I would like the appropriate time to be able to look for additional employment.”

Speakers were also concerned about the board’s ability to work together and how they plan to fix that.

“I think it’s clear, the five of us (board members) aren’t working well as a team,” School Board Vice President Andrew Lehman said early in the forum. “We, as board members, need to be able to have dialogue and conversations within the team here to figure out what are our non-negotiables.”

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“What are you gonna do to get the five of you on the same page? Because clearly you addressed that you’re not,” a parent asked. “...If you guys can’t be on the same page, me as a community person, I would ask for your resumes.”

“I’ll admit I failed to argue where I could convince a majority of the board the direction that I’m trying to direct this board,” School Board President Dean Dobbertin said in response.

Lehman responded, citing a recent climate survey which found that only 19% of teachers felt appreciated by the School Board, saying the board should pay more attention to those surveys. Board member Lindsay Kent said that the board has adjusted in response to surveys with changes such as meeting transparency.

Parents have organized in support of Stein, circulating an online petition with 217 signatures as of Tuesday and creating two websites, one called standbysteinstein.com and the other called mertonschoolminutes.com.

“Most of us were parents who were caught up in our busy lives — trusting our school and school board to make the best decisions for our children,” Amy Miller, a parent who started the petition, told The Freeman. “All of that changed when we heard that Principal Stein was going to be non-renewed by three members of the board — it didn’t make sense. For many, she was the

heart of Merton Primary itself.”

Policy change

In October, the School Board passed a policy which would give the board the ability to “actively” renew administrative contracts instead of “passively” as it was done before.

Previously, the district and board did not notify the administrator ahead of the state-required deadlines for nonrenewal; the contract automatically was extended or rolled over, according to district documents.

“An active approval would mean the School Board would formally approve an extension or roll over to a contract ahead of the state required dates of nonrenewal,” district documents say.

School Board members Dobbertin and Lehman voted against this policy with board members Kent, Nicole Cotton and Troy Andersen voting for it, meeting minutes show.

The board met in closed session three times last month — Jan. 10, 13 and 17. The Jan. 10 and 13 meeting agendas listed discussions on administrator contracts and the Jan. 17 meeting agenda listed discussion on an administrative employee’s resignation.

When community members asked for details on Stein’s resignation and her contract on Monday, the board said they could not comment on personnel issues at the time.

Stein’s contract expires in 2023, according to district documents; her resignation is effective July 1.