

January 26, 2024

Mr. Runsewe,

In response to your solicitation to staff to reach out, I will do so, and admit I do have concerns.

As someone who has studied and worked in restorative practice, I know that when the whole school witnesses a fight, the whole school needs to have the restoration. When a teacher is subjected to a threat or a crime, the teacher needs to be part of those conversations with the student and family. When a student is assaulted by another student, both children and both families need to be a part of that communication mediated by us, the school. That's the restorative practice. We are not doing that. That concerns me as it is creating an unsafe environment for all.

I also have concerns about the vast amount of student commentary that I hear regarding fentanyl. Perhaps it's just students talking but seeing our incident report state its existence makes me feel like this isn't just conversation and that it isn't an isolated incident.

You stated "as you know, South is a safe learning environment" but I don't know that. It certainly doesn't feel that way to me. From the many people who have talked to me, it seems that they too, students and staff, don't find it safe. A child violently attacked three adults in an attempt to assault a fellow student and I witnessed it and there was no follow up. This was the first week of school. I requested follow up as I was the primary adult witness. I even requested it of Dr. Walker to no avail.

I understand that we all become busy. The train keeps moving, as it were, and it is difficult to make these things happen in real time. I also know that we, as educators, understand the lasting impact even one of these events has on our students, not to mention the extreme number. Should I even mention the brawl in the commons last week? It is imperative that we stop the train and take the time to acknowledge the collective trauma. I'm sure the larger community would be more than happy for us to work on restorative practice in lieu of more testing.

I will share with you an anecdote that happened last week which was extremely concerning to me, and perhaps you'll see and sense it as well. A student, a young Hispanic boy, came into my class. I happen to know for a fact that he has only been in this country since this summer from Ecuador. He is learning and he is very sweet. He turned to his friend in my room and he called him the 'n-word'. I was taken aback as I don't often hear that word from anyone save certain students who are allowed to use it

with impunity in the hallways (along with 'bitch', 'cunt', 'faggot' and other "acceptable" slurs). I asked him to clarify what he just said because I wanted to be sure. He and his friend got sheepish and he repeated it. I got stern, not because I was upset with him but because I knew the dangers for him if he used that word in inappropriate company. I told him to never use it again.

This story reminds me of my own foray in MPS as a child where I blurted out a curse word because I thought it was a word that meant "I'm finished". I was five. This boy clearly thought he was using a synonym for 'friend'. The disappointing look on his face when I told him to never use it again clearly showed that he feared he wasn't learning our language properly. Like I said, he is a sweet kid trying to understand our culture.

Yes, I have great concerns for safety and morale, not just of students, but of staff. I've outlined some here and I have more. Your response to the issues going public I find wildly unacceptable, even tone deaf. I myself am grateful someone took the strides to make what is happening here known to the larger community. It means that, perhaps, we can get the help that we so desperately need. We do not have a 'safe' environment, we do not even have a collegial environment. In fact, the number of threatening emails I have received simply because, I don't know why, I'm part of MPRB (?) is disturbing. I've had my car vandalized. These events too come from lack of sturdy leadership that can guide staff as well as children. Let's not forget you threatened to fire me if I didn't 'quit' my elected position. That is not the posture of one who is solution oriented, collaboration oriented. Though I have taken that issue through different channels, it is one that lingers in my mind on the larger idea of putative and authoritarian measures taken in lieu of true problem solving.

As for my op ed, I don't know if your comments included that, but I stand by it. Absolutely. I have heard all of these stories and more in terrific detail.

This is not a critique on our students, far from it. It is a critique on our leadership. How can we expect kids to understand restorative practice when we don't do it here? How can we expect young people to understand that assault as an adult will put you in jail when doing it here will simply land you a one day in school suspension, if even that. Often there is no repercussion for assault. NOTHING. I'm not speaking from ideology, I've witnessed it. We say that there are no drugs, perhaps because it got so bad that the bathrooms are perpetually locked and students have to request a key to access.

Teachers work hard, many of us have masters degrees and the disrespectful tones we hear on a daily basis are beyond unacceptable. That is why so many amazing educators are quitting. Not just South but MPS. This is discouraging. We need to foster a sense of GRATITUDE from our students. Education is a privilege that many have literally died

for over the centuries. I'm sure I don't need to tell you of our history of denying education to certain people groups in the United States. That is why it is so important that we guard this privilege with discipline and mutual respect. How can we expect children to respect themselves if we do not first show respect for each other? Public education is the best idea (next to national parks, if you ask me) that America has ever had. It is the greatest place of equity. This is why we need to work so passionately to assure that children are held accountable to cherishing it for what it is, rather than thumb their nose at the gift we are giving them.

I found out today that we are losing yet another amazing educator here at South for lack of support and discipline. The loss of this teacher is not only a massive hit to our students and to the morale of myself and others who worked with him, but it now takes the entire school out of compliance with the ELL department. I was told in no uncertain terms 'if even one EL shelter teacher leaves, we are out of compliance with the state'. You knew this and despite him practically begging for support, you ignored this. Where does the buck stop?

I am not the kind of person who simply goes through the union for more money to address such issues as I've outlined here. More money would be great when you have to learn a second or third language to teach your student population, but it is not necessary. I love my students, all of them. I seek only for us to be honest about what is transpiring in our halls so that we might teach kids the greatest of pursuits: how to navigate the world with love and compassion.

Thank you for requesting that we staff reach out. As you know, I have. I have reached out countless times to afford our students opportunities from divergent things like meeting Chet Holmgren and the Oklahoma City Thunder, to having the Superintendent of parks come speak to our kids and give them a personal tour of Powderhorn park. All of the different suggestions and opportunities have not just been 'rebuffed' they have, as the kids say, been 'ghosted'. I wonder if this was an accident of a large amount of emails or if it were some intentional snub. I cc'd all the assistant Principals on the requests so I had hoped someone saw it.

I don't understand why we would stand in the way of opportunities for our kids the same way I don't understand why we would gaslight their experiences (and our own) by saying things are 'safe' when they so obviously are not. This divide can only mean one of two things: either we have vastly different ideas of what the word 'safe' means, or one of us is playing false. There is no third option.

I wonder how far, as a parent, I would accept a teacher should go to make sure that parents knew that there were prolific amounts of guns and other weapons in their child's

school, which we know there are here at South High. I know that if this were the case at my son's school, I would be livid at the perceived cover up.

As I said in my op-ed, the check comes due. I do not equivocate in my support and protection of children. Sometimes this comes at the cost of adults' feelings. For that I do not and never will apologize.

I'll finish with this. We know that 'a matter of privacy' is almost always a code phrase to cover up abuse. We are mandated reporters. At a school (NOT South), I once witnessed a mother assault her child right in front of two admin, myself and another teacher. The administrators did nothing. I was almost more shocked by the lack of intervention than I was at the mother. When I asked why (before I made my own report to the county) they did nothing the administrator responded, "that's mom..." I retorted "That's child abuse!" and they snapped back at me with a shrug, "She's 16."

Teenagers are still children. I am not trying to infantilize them nor am I trying to 'punish them as adults'. In order to truly help them we need to take our knowledge and policies and APPLY THEM, not stonewall to the point of continued absurdity. The school looks to you for honest leadership. You have a unique opportunity at this amazing school to provide it thoughtfully and fiercely.

For my part, I cannot accept the gaslight. It feels and is a massive betrayal of the trust that our staff has placed in you. To quote my friend, Director Cerillo, "Leadership matters". The question becomes then, what kind of leader are you? One who rests on title and retaliation, or one who does what they know to be right even if it is hard? Who is willing to 'stand in the gap' where the waters rush and the wind blows and strength and courage are required.

We, stakeholders of South High, await your answer.

**Becka Thompson, MAE
(Commissioner, MPRB)**

**South High, Mathematics
South High, Head Softball Coach**

"All is number"
-pythagoras