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For Immediate Release:

State Department of Education Refuses to Allow Parents to Talk Immediately after the Close of a Training Session Held to Teach Superintendents How to Communicate Effectively with Parents.

The Connecticut Parents' Rights Coalition is appalled at the Behavior of the State Department of Education and Demands an Explanation or an Investigation.

As part of Education Commissioner Wentzell's "leadership strategies", designed to urge superintendents to "encourage" parents to have their children take the SBAC test rather than to opt out, the Commissioner called in Superintendents from public school districts across the state to the Department's Hartford headquarters for a "training session" on how effectively to communicate with parents.

Facing reduced participation in the SBAC test, the Commissioner deemed it necessary to give the superintendents more "tools" to persuade parents to allow their children to take the test. Among the "tools", the Commissioner informed the Superintendents that if their school district's participation rate fell below 95%, the district would be subject to dire consequences, including the loss of federal funding and the lowering of the ranking of the district moving it closer to a state takeover. This, despite the fact that the Commissioner of Education recently acknowledged in testimony before the legislature's Education Committee that parents do have a Constitutionally protected right to refuse to allow their children to take the test. Yet, that right is not being respected when the Commissioner threatens parents, schools, and school districts with punishment for exercising that right.

When the Commissioner called the superintendents for more "training" to increase the participation rates, naturally parents were curious to find out about what the "training" consisted and sought to find out.

Some noteworthy things happened both before and after the training session about which the public should be aware:

1. Parents politely notified the State Department of Education, days in advance, that they planned to attend the "training session".
2. While the Freedom of Information Act (Conn. Gen. Stat. Sec. 1-225 and Sec. 1-200) states that "meetings of all public agencies shall be open to the public", and defines public agency as "including any committee of, or created by, any such office, subdivision, agency, department, institution, bureau, board, commission, authority or official", and defines "meeting" as "any hearing or other proceeding of a public agency...to discuss or act upon a matter over which the public agency has supervision control, jurisdiction or advisory power", nonetheless, the State Department of Education attempted to keep the "training session" for superintendents closed to the public, stating it "is not a venue for members of the general public to participate".
3. Instead, the State Department of Education referred parents elsewhere, telling them that they could "utilize the public comment section during the State Board of Education meeting to voice opinions, ideas and concerns".
4. The State Department of Education eventually changed its mind about keeping the meeting closed, but notified only one parent of that decision, and did so only five hours before the meeting was to take place. Consequently, only a few parents got that message upon such short notice and were able to attend.
5. Upon arrival at the meeting, those parents were told that they were not allowed to speak at the meeting, and that they were expected to sit quietly and simply observe.
6. The meeting commenced uneventfully and continued for an hour and a half.
7. Those parents in attendance, dutifully and politely, did as they were requested and sat quietly and simply observed until the presentation to the superintendents ended and the superintendents had no further questions.

8. As the Deputy Commissioner was stating her last words ending the meeting, one parent stood up and thanked the Department for its presentation. That parent was allowed to speak, and the thanks offered was accepted.
9. During the presentation, the Deputy Commissioner expressed to the Superintendents that they were to ask parents why they were refusing to allow their children to take the SBAC test. When the parent who stood up after the meeting ended to thank the Department attempted to explain why parents refuse to allow their children to take the test, the Deputy Commissioner stood up abruptly and abrasively interrupted the speaker calling an immediate halt to the meeting, commenting, "See, this is why we shouldn't have let them in" and she threatened to call security. At that point, the superintendents turned their backs on the parent and exited the room.
10. In effect, the parents acted with patience and respect, quietly observed and listened intently throughout the entire meeting until it had concluded.
11. The Deputy Commissioner of Education, and the superintendents, on the other hand, after being instructed for an hour and a half on how to effectively communicate with parents, quietly observed and listened only for a matter of seconds to the parent, interrupted her, turned their backs to her, and promptly walked out of the room.

See for yourself what happened.

Video link.

Clearly the State Department of Education, and the superintendents, need much more work on their communication skills. Certainly, lessons in civility also wouldn't hurt.

One wonders why the State Department of Education was so fearful of what the parent had to say that it was necessary to cut her off and threaten to call security.

Apparently, communication with parents is only a one way street.

It would be wise for the State Department of Education to remember that its members work for the public, and that parents, not the government, have a fundamental Constitutional right to the upbringing and education of their children.

One would at least hope that the Department offers an explanation, or an apology, for its most egregious behavior.

If it does not, one can only hope the legislature will conduct a thorough investigation.

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