

Teachers' dissatisfaction with Leopold principal reaches boiling point

By Kurt Gutknecht

Fitchburg Star Editor

The management of Principal Mary Hyde has prompted a near revolt among teachers and staff members at Leopold Elementary School.

Discontent among teachers has been simmering for years and came to the forefront recently when Hyde, who's been principal at the school for six years, decided to terminate a shared teaching arrangement that had previously been praised by Hyde and others.

Sue Talarczyk, who has had such an arrangement with Sue Wagner for seven years, unsuccessfully sought a fuller explanation for Hyde's decision. Ninety-one teachers and staff members at the school signed a petition asking Hyde to reconsider the termination.

Appeals to district administrators to review Hyde's decision were also unsuccessful.

Several teachers characterized Hyde as insensitive, intimidating and inconsiderate. All except Talarczyk asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution.

Teachers interviewed for this article said Hyde made decisions unilaterally, without weighing the opinions of teachers and staff members.

Apprehension and mistrust

Morale is low and there's a pervasive atmosphere of apprehension and mistrust that has made working there nearly intolerable, they said.

Several teachers said Hyde had retaliated against teachers who questioned her decisions, prompting several to quit and seek jobs elsewhere.

In an interview, Hyde cited "problematical communication" for discontinuing the job share arrangement between Talarczyk and Wagner. She refused to say whether there had been any complaints about the teaching arrangement, citing the confidentiality of personnel matters.

Talarczyk said Hyde had told her there had not been any complaints about the job-sharing arrangement and that her attempts to discuss the issue were met with "a long deafening silence."

"I certainly have had no difficulty filling positions," Hyde said, when asked about resignations at the school. "People have not come in to say 'I'm miserable and unhappy.'"

"I've been a principal for 20 years. Nothing surprises me – well, maybe a few things surprise me," she said, when asked about reports of low morale among teachers.

Some decisions unpopular

"As a principal, I make a lot of decisions, and some of them are unpopular."

Several parents wrote letters supporting

the collaborative teaching arrangement. Talarczyk said parents had volunteered to write letters and neither she nor Wagner had actively solicited parents' support.

One longtime teacher said staff members had tried not to let parents know about their concerns until matters came to a head this spring.

One teacher said Hyde was "emotionally dysfunctional" and seemed to take pleasure in pitting staff members against each other "She took the school to the brink. Is that leadership? She's a bully," the teacher said.

Parents also described sagging morale at the school in their letters.

"I have been with this school for the last eight years and it has been mostly a great experience, but the way things are going, I honestly don't know where this is all going to lead. There are many great teachers at Leopold I wish someone would listen to them for a change!" wrote parent Denise Clark.

"Leopold has seen a loss of many great teachers over the past 11 years, many of which have been during the reign of Ms. Hyde. Why is this?" wrote parent Lori Kiley.

Talarczyk said she reluctantly decided to have the decision reversed, even though she feared retribution. She was surprised at the willingness of 91 teachers and staff members to sign a petition asking Hyde to change her mind.

Several teachers were bitter and angry. They questioned why the administration had failed to address their concerns.

Several aspects of a seven-category performance appraisal process the district uses for principals and other administrators apparently involve relationships with teachers.

These include problem solving and conflict resolution, management/administration collaboration/communication and leadership.

Hyde refused to categorize her style of administration but said she worked with a "leadership and action teams."

She said the school had recently been designated a Wisconsin School of Promise by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and that there had been "significant improvements" in literacy during the last five years.

Teachers said Hyde does not acknowledge their role in these achievements.

"She's a bully," said one. "We teach kids how to get along and stand up to bullies, and then we have to deal with an administrator who treats people so poorly."

"She is revengeful. It may take a year or two, but she will get you. Unless you do exactly what she wants, you're on her list," the teacher added. The teacher said Hyde's dissolution of the job sharing agreement was simply another example of revenge against a respected staff member.



Teachers at Aldo Leopold Elementary School in the Madison Metropolitan School District say they can no longer tolerate the management of Principal Mary Hyde.

One teacher compared the atmosphere at the school to North Korea under dictator Kim Jung-il.

Another cited a "real decline in morale" and a high staff turnover. "We're not really respected," the teacher said.

Teachers cited numerous instances in which Hyde made decisions contrary to their preferences, usually without an explanation. Others cited disparaging remarks and negative comments after others had cited their accomplishments.

"Hyde is rewarded for her loyalty to the administration," a teacher said.

Teachers at Leopold are divided in their views about multi-age classrooms, in which there are two grades in a classroom. Instead of encouraging open discussion, teachers said Hyde has deliberately stifled discussion and kept them in the dark. Teachers favoring the method seem to get more support, one teacher said.

Can't get any worse

"Hyde is pretty dictatorial, once she has her mind set on something, but we're not going to give up. We've seen principals come and go. I don't think things can get any worse," said a teacher.

Talarczyk said her attempts to reverse Hyde's decision were "an eye-opening experience for me."

While she's gratified by the support of fellow teachers, she's also disappointed at the lack of response from district administrators.

"Although I understand you are upset with the dissolving of this job share, administration supports Principal Hyde's decision. Principals have always retained the right to assign staff within their building. After talking to Principal Hyde, she has made this decision based on what she feels is best practice for the needs of Leopold Elementary School," Susan

Abplanalp, assistant superintendent for the district, wrote to Talarczyk.

"It's not difficult to see why she (Hyde) would be difficult to deal with," said a teacher who left Leopold several years ago because of Hyde.

The teacher said Hyde was "a very smart person who presents herself well" and can appear to "be amicable and friendly" when necessary. "She has her strengths. She's an excellent public speaker and a hard worker."

Others questioned her work ethic and said she had foisted many of her responsibilities on other staff members. Teachers said they had stopped taking their concerns directly to Hyde.

A longtime teacher said Hyde was by far "the most difficult principal" to work with and that Hyde had "inculcated a pervasive sense of mistrust" at the school.

"She has the right to make decisions, but this goes far beyond just a disagreement about management style," the teacher said. "Hyde appears to be vindictive and petty, especially toward people who questioned her decisions. She bullied staff members."

The teacher said Hyde's behavior appeared to be related to "a mental health issue."

Several teachers said Hyde appeared to discriminate against older, experienced teachers and questioned whether she was guilty of age discrimination.

Others said they had been embarrassed and frustrated by Hyde's failure to follow through on commitments with parents, which they saw as another example of her unwillingness to delegate responsibility.

"She's working against the best interests of everybody," said a teacher. Several teachers said they hoped Hyde would decide to retire after the next school year.

By a 5-2 vote, Council decides to reject tighter smoking rules

By Kurt Gutknecht

Fitchburg Star Editor

Supporters of a smoking ban in Fitchburg say they aren't going to give up.

While discouraged by the common council's 5-2 decision against the measure on July 11, they think they have the public support to pass the measure, and may bring the matter back again for consideration.

The council's refusal to delay a vote on the measure so Ald. Richard Bloomquist could vote angered supporters, as did the council's refusal to consider amendments. Bloomquist had said he wouldn't support the original ordinance but would consider doing so if it was amended.

The council approved a change to the date the ordinance would take effect but voted on the matter without considering other amendments.

A 'war against smokers'

Ald. Jason Williams compared the right to smoke to a woman's right to an abortion. He said the debate over the ordinance boiled down to "who has the biggest stick

and knows how to use it."

Instead of declaring "a war against smokers," Williams said supporters should target tobacco companies. He also recommended more education about the dangers of smoking and criticized the state's decision to use funds obtained in a settlement from tobacco companies to balance the budget instead of educational programs.

"Smokers have been pushed out of every single corner in the last 20 years," Williams said, and warned that a ban on smoking was "the slippery slope" that would eventually lead to measures against fatty foods.

Few ban supporters were patrons of the bars that would be harmed by a smoking ban, he said.

Upholding the Constitution

"This is their last refuge," Williams warned. He suggested proponents meet with the owners of bars and restaurants that allow smoking and convince them that a ban on smoking would be good for their businesses.

Williams said his opposition to the ordinance was based on a mandate to

"uphold the Constitution to protect individual freedoms."

Ald. Bill Horns, who cosponsored the measure, said the health effects of second-hand smoke clearly outweighed economic losses associated with a ban.

Ald. Roger Tesch said he was concerned that the measure applied to all firms with one or more employees, and could require farmers to post signs all their buildings.

Ald. Scott Norton praised Williams' comments and said the ban was based on "wants" instead of any compelling need. He supported a statewide ban. People should accept responsibility for their actions and "should expect smoke when they go to a bar," he said.

Norton said results of his survey showed a majority of residents opposed a ban, and even many of those who favored a ban wanted restrictions that were "more friendly" than the ban in Madison. The results of his survey were probably more accurate than the number of those who testified at meetings, he said.

Concerns about enforcement

Arnold said it was easier to introduce a new ordinance than to amend the existing ordinance. Mayor Tom Clauder said he had a "huge concern" about enforcing the ban. Arnold said the enforcement provisions were similar to those now in effect.

A local ban would be more effective than accepting a "watered down version," Arnold said. He said a statewide ban was unlikely, considering that the legislature didn't even hold a hearing on the matter last year.

Proponents and opponents reiterated many of the arguments advanced previously, which generally pitted the health benefits against individual rights and the economic losses associated with a ban.

Some of the language was colorful. One proponent said walking into an area with secondhand smoke was like "being asked to go put your head in the toilet" and that refusing to implement a ban was "strictly cowardice."

An opponent compared the proposed ban to the anti-democratic actions of Islamic fundamentalists. "Progressive Dane can take over somewhere else," said another opponent.