Teachers' dissatisfaction with Leopold principal reaches boiling point

By Kurt Gutnecht
Fitchburg Star Editor

T he management of Principal Mary Hyde has prompted a near revolt among teachers at Leopold Elementary School. The issue 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 been previously 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 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 incommodating. All except Talarczyk asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation.

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

Apprehension and mistrust

Morale is low and there's a pervasive atmosphere of tension and apprehension 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. "If there were any complaints about the teaching arrangement, citing the confidentiality of personnel matters," Talarczyk said she had told her there had been no complaints about the 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 unfulfilled.'"

"I've been a principal for 20 years. Not only have I not had any problems, I've had plenty of teacher support," Talarczyk said, when asked for 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 help and were willing to actively solicit parents' support.

One longtime teacher said staff members had tried not to let the issue affect their concerns until matters came to a head.

One teacher said Hyde was "emotionally dysfunctional" and seemed to take personal vendettas against teachers.

Parents also described sagging morale at the school in recent years, "I have been with this school for the last eight years and it has been mostly a positive experience, but the way things are going, I honestly don't know where this is all going," said a teacher.

"There are many great teachers at Leopold I wish someone would listen to them for a change!" wrote parent Lori Kles.

Talarczyk said she reluctantly decided to help with the decision-making because "she feared retribution. She was surprised at the willingness of 91 teachers and staff members to sign a petition and agree 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.

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

Hyde refused to categorize her style of administration but acknowledged a "leadership and action team."

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

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

The administration was accused of distorting kids how to get along and stand up to bullies, and then we have to deal with an alleged principal's poor decisions," said a teacher.

"She is revengeful. It may take a year or two before you will get vindication if you actually know what you want, you're on her list," another teacher said, adding that Hyde "dissolution of the job sharing arrangement was simply another example of revenge against a respected staff member."

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

"I've been at schools where there was a 'real deal in morale' and a high staff turnover. "We're not really respected," the teacher said.

"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 support from fellow teachers and administrators."

"Although I understand you are upset with the dissolving of this job share, administration supported Principle Hyde's decision. Principals have always retained the right to assign staff within their building. After talking to Principle 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) was making the decisions she was," another opponent.

"Hyde was a "very smart person who presents herself well" and can appear "beatable administrati-" when necessary. She has her strengths. She's an excellent public speaker and a hard worker."

Others questioned her work ethic and whether she had fostered 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 per- versive sense of mistrust" at the school.

"She has the right to make decisions, but this goes far beyond just a disagree- ment about management style," the teacher said.

"Hyde appears to be vindictive and petty, especially toward people who ques- tioned 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 "a hard worker."

Others said they had been embarrassed and frustrated by Hyde's failure to follow through on commitments with parents, staff members and students.

"She's working against the best in- terest 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 Gutnecht
Fitchburg Star Editor

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

At a city council meeting last Thursday, despite the dissolving of this job share, administration supported Principle Hyde's decision. Principals have always retained the right to assign staff within their building. After talking to Principle 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 new ordinance that aimed at ending the existing ordinance. Mayor Tom Clauer said he had trouble making a decision on the ordinance. Arnold said the enforcement provisions were similar to those now in effect.

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