

The Board of Education did not understand the magnitude of the challenge

Lesson 1

Last May, as the school year wound down, determining what the fall of 2020 would look like for our students was an unprecedented challenge. The hard job of creating a plan to safely return almost 54,000 SFUSD students and their teachers and staff to school rested with the Board of Education and Superintendent Vincent Matthews.

On May 12, 2020 during his report to the board, Superintendent Matthews announced, "We know that reopening schools will be a challenge and will require extraordinary coordination and planning. As a result, we have opened an RFQ...to help identify an outside partner to help facilitate and plan this work."

On June 9, Superintendent Matthews and Daniel Menezes, Chief HR officer of SFUSD, appealed to the Board for assistance. They pointed out that the work of reopening schools was "a massive undertaking" and "given all the uncertainties and all of the complexities," they were seeking "a partner who would help support a comprehensive plan for returning to in-person schooling." They had issued a request for quotation (RFQ) for help reopening schools, considered seven options, and were now seeking the Board's approval of their recommendation.

The partner they chose (Promise 54) was noted for:

- 1) Having previously worked with SFUSD
- 2) Specializing in equity, diversity, and inclusion work in education spaces
- 3) Possessing deep project management experience

Dr. Matthews explicitly explained they were seeking "the planning and partnership group to focus on a scope of work that includes a comprehensive project plan that accounts for multiple contingencies and scenarios. Scenarios where we fully reopen in brick and mortar settings, scenarios where we fully reopen virtually, hybrid models, so on and so forth."

Furthermore, this contract was going to be paid for by outside funds. As explained by Gentle Blythe, the Deputy Superintendent of Strategic Partnerships and Communication, donations to the city's Covid-19 Response Fund would fund the planning phase of this project. SFUSD's budget, already facing deep shortfalls, would not be affected.

The Board was, overall, not receptive to the request. They believed inside resources should be used for project management, with Commissioner Alison Collins stating "it is also concerning to me that we have to hire somebody to do project management. We should be able to do project management. I don't understand why we can't do that."

In addition, Project 54 and the other top-two contenders all had previous involvement with charter schools, and this made them unacceptable to Board members. Commissioner Collins went so far as to declare using an outside consultant who had worked with charter schools akin to “recreating white supremacy” and “disaster capitalism.”

Collins accurately pointed out that unpaid parent volunteers provide many valuable services for the district and suggested that maybe we should pay these parents instead, since the main need (in her view) was not project management, but outreach: “I want to shift the way we do things, and definitely there's work in project management. But, you know, most of the work is outreach...we need to do it differently and now might be a good time to do that.” She ends with the assertion that having an authentic plan is more important than having any plan at all, closing with “And if it's not based on actual input that's authentic and is co-created with community members, in partnership and trust, then it doesn't—*I don't care about a plan—it doesn't matter.*”

Commissioner Gabriela López also expressed that current staff should be capable of planning for school reopening during the pandemic, stating “So, I just want to hold that I think we have a lot of bright minds. We certainly pay for a lot of bright minds.” She also appears to underestimate the importance of project management expertise when she says, “If they're developing a plan, but we're the ones who will execute it. Why do we need them anyway?”

Commissioner Rachel Norton expressed her shared distaste for the chosen vendor, but suggested it was more important to prioritize the urgent needs of the students and families, stating: *“we don't have the capacity internally to do this work in an unprecedented time. I just think we're losing sight of the real important underlying issue here which is that we need to have the best opening we possibly can.”*

Board President Mark Sanchez called the choice of vendor “unfortunate” and pressed Dr. Matthews on what Plan B might be. Dr. Matthews stated clearly that there was no Plan B. “*We were counting on this,*” he said. With approval of the plan they intended to “hit the ground running tonight. And actually begin setting up meetings tomorrow.”

Ultimately, the proposal was defeated. Commissioners Collins, López, Lam, and Moliga all voted against it; Commissioner Cook was absent, only Commissioners Norton and Sanchez voted for it. *Superintendent Matthews called the decision “a body blow.”*

At the close of this meeting, it is fair to conclude that, in addition to their ideological concerns, the Board of Education turned down the request for outside assistance because they believed the task could be handled in-house. It is through this lens that we evaluate the outcome of this decision: after an entire year of distance learning the Board announced a plan in which 60% of the students have the opportunity to attend partial school in-person for six weeks at most, *and with no clear plan for the fall.*