

The Board of Education's priorities are out of sync with those of San Francisco's families

Lesson 3

When schools closed in March 2020 no one knew when they would reopen for in-person learning. But we knew from day one that returning our students to their classrooms was a critical goal, and that it would require an enormous, well-coordinated effort. We knew that tackling a challenge of this scope would require focus and unwavering commitment. For the San Francisco Board of Education, as for all districts nationwide, this should have meant a full-scale prioritization of planning for a safe return to school.

Unfortunately for SFUSD families, this urgent prioritization of the needs of our children did not happen. Instead, the Board prioritized issues that, while important to us all, did not help our children return to school. We explore the evidence for this below in the Board's decisions, statements, and actions.

Example A. The Board's Priorities were Misplaced from the Start: Rejection of Professional Help.

The Board's June 9th decision to reject Superintendent Vincent Matthews' request for outside help from a professional education consultant with demonstrated project management experience has been widely discussed, and deservedly so. (Lesson 1) It was a defining moment of the Board's failure to rise to the occasion and to acknowledge the level of effort required to do so. We discuss it again here because it was an early indicator that, in the minds of our Commissioners, ideology ranked higher than getting SFUSD students back into the classroom. "I don't want to make a decision because there's an urgency," said President López, regarding the vote to approve the hire.

The main issue was that the recommended partner, Promise54 had worked with charter schools in the past. However, as Superintendent Matthews explained, "almost all, if not all, [of the potential consultants] had some connection with both charters and traditional public schools." He goes on to protest that, "as we move forward...over time, there's going to be more and more either principals or teachers or paraprofessionals who all have some connection with charters and with traditional public schools."

Commissioner López made clear that messaging was more important to her, saying "So for me it's just what the messaging really is. When we are connected, whether we want to admit it or not...What is the message, if we do work with these organizations and really follow the money." Commissioner Collins reiterates that her decision is based on ideology, saying "This is a principle-based decision. We need to stop doing it [referring to partnering with outside consultants]."

Only Commissioner Rachel Norton seemed to understand the priorities of the moment saying, "I don't love who they've worked with, either. To me, that's less important than supporting our superintendent and holding him accountable for making sure he gets this process right, because that is the most important." Board President Mark Sanchez followed up on Norton's comment, asking "How do we guarantee what Commissioner Norton is actually saying, a smooth opening, that works well for all, as well as they can, for our students and families. Can we do that without this organization?"

Matthews replied, "I wish I could give you that answer. I mean we're gonna do everything we can to make that happen. Were we counting on this? There's – there's no doubt we were."

Superintendent Matthews made clear that he and SFUSD's leadership team had no Plan B, yet, the majority of the Board – Commissioners López, Collins, Lam and Moliga – voted against it.

Example B. This Board Does Not Understand the Priorities of the Job They Were Elected to Do

Most of our current Commissioners did not choose to serve their terms during a pandemic, yet that is the situation in which they found themselves. They had worked hard to get elected to a position of enormous power and responsibility, but when the stakes grew higher, they failed to comprehend that they were the only governing body with the authority to make things happen in this critical arena at this critical time. Their behavior suggests that they understood their power but misunderstood their responsibility. On January 5th, 2021, ten months into the pandemic and with no reopening plan in place, the Board convened for a special, facilitated meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to clarify the values and goals that would "drive our leadership attention, how we use our time, and our budgeting decisions" for the upcoming year.

During the meeting, Commissioners engaged in various exercises to unearth shared values and identify differences of opinion and opportunities to connect. At the end of the meeting each Commissioner was asked to state their top two priorities. Collectively they identified a range of important goals, including addressing budget deficits, reallocating resources to target underserved students, and making schools physically, emotionally and intellectually safe for all students.

Astoundingly, *only two of the seven Commissioners* – Jenny Lam and Kevine Boggess – listed school reopening as one of their top two priorities.

Example C. The Board Revealed its Priorities in How They Conducted Public Meetings

An examination of how the BOE organized public meetings reveals that reopening schools was, literally and figuratively, not at the top of their list.

Between June 9, 2020 and March 16, 2021, the BOE conducted more than eighty meetings; by our count only twenty listed reopening as an official agenda item. At the majority of the public Board of Education meetings that took place while schools were shuttered, the topic of school reopening did not even appear on the agenda.

When reopening did make the agenda, it was near the end of the schedule, often listed as item H or I. At the October 20th meeting, which ran over nine hours, the reopening discussion began somewhere around the seven hour mark. Parents repeatedly expressed frustration at the low prioritization of the reopening discussion at meetings, complaining that they had to wait until late at night before they began...as late as 11pm for meetings that had begun at 3pm.

This issue came to a head during public comments at the February 9th BOE meeting, and some Commissioners felt compelled to speak out: "I have a comment surrounding the agenda," said Jenny Lam, "and also just wanting to acknowledge the fact that there's a lot of parents who'd like to be here who can't, because you know they're busy...they work a lot...and not to say that anyone who is on here isn't busy, but I think it would be really beneficial for everyone, to move these conversations to the beginning of the agenda."

Matt Alexander went even further, saying "...this is kind of crazy that we're talking about this at 11:30 at night. We still have 200 people on the call which shows, I think, the dedication of folks who care about this and are trying to find out about it, and it just seems...I think we have to figure out a different way."

Example D. *The Board Wasted Energy and Capital Pursuing Other Priorities:*

We find further evidence that the Board misunderstood their top priority by comparing their slow pace developing a reopening plan with their swift, decisive progress in enacting two significant changes in the SFUSD system – changes that were unrelated to reopening schools.

Misplaced Priority #1: The Project to Rename SFUSD Schools:

During the same basic timeframe as when schools were closed, the Board made significant headway on their goal to rename schools whose namesakes have connections to slavery, genocide, or oppression. A "[Blue Ribbon](#)" Panel tasked with renaming began their work in January 2020, and seven months later issued their list of schools to be renamed. (Families for San Francisco's [A Report on SFUSD School Renaming](#) documented the deeply flawed process undertaken by the Board in designing and overseeing this effort.)

On October 5, the [Panel sent letters](#) to principals at schools that had been selected for renaming, instructing them to begin a comprehensive community engagement process with four separate school groups in order to collect their thoughts on alternate names. They were told to submit up to eight names for the panel to consider; the initial deadline was November 15 (it has been extended twice and is currently April 19, 2021). These principals were already eight chaotic months into supporting their teachers and students in distance learning, with no end in sight. None of these school sites were open nor had plans to reopen.

On January 26, 2021, seven hours into the meeting and prior to any discussion of the “*Return to In-Person Learning Update*” agenda item, the Board voted 6-1 to rename 44 schools, representing $\frac{1}{3}$ of the schools in the SFUSD system; Commissioner Kevine Boggess was the only “nay” vote. The Board’s vote to rename the schools gained national media attention that subjected the San Francisco school district — and the city as a whole — to ridicule and derision.

The following day, an announcement was tucked in the 3rd paragraph in a parent email that said “it is unlikely that we’ll be able to offer most middle and high school students the opportunity for in-person learning this school year.”

On February 1st, San Francisco attorney Paul Scott sent a letter to Board President López demanding that the Board repeal the resolution it had passed to rename schools because their public notification efforts had violated the Brown Act — California’s open-meeting law — and denied due process to the public.

On February 3, the San Francisco City Attorney’s office, in collaboration with Mayor London Breed, filed suit against SFUSD in response to its lack of a legally mandated reopening plan, saying that “Rather than prioritizing resources on creating a reasonable plan to reopen schools, Respondents have dedicated limited time and money to renaming empty schools now. For that misguided priority, Respondents created a plan, established a “blue-ribbon panel,” and took action. Respondents seem to feel no similar urgency to reopen schools or, at the very least, even create a plan to do so.”

In response, on February 4th, Board President Gabriela López stated in an opinion piece in the SF Chronicle that efforts to rename schools were not delaying reopening schools. “Our efforts to dismantle racist symbols and white supremacy culture does not diminish the board’s focus on other pressing matters,” she insisted.

Finally, on February 21, in the wake of overwhelming public pressure, Board President López announced that the Board was putting the renaming process on hold. She explained that the renaming effort “was a process begun in 2018 with a timeline that didn’t anticipate a pandemic.”

This explanation begs the question: why did it take 11 months for the Board to recognize and acknowledge they should not “be taking valuable time from our board agendas to further discuss this, as we need to prioritize reopening.” (Note: The Paul Scott lawsuit continues and a judge recently ruled to require the Board to vacate their decision and disband the “blue ribbon” panel or explain why they haven’t already done so.)

Misplaced priority #2: Eliminating Merit-Based Admissions at Lowell High School

The Board’s actions regarding the Lowell admissions policy further demonstrates their ability to act swiftly and decisively when it chooses to.

On October 9, 2020 the Board announced a proposal to change the admissions process of Lowell High School for the school year 2021-22, shifting to the rank-choice lottery system used by most schools in the SFUSD system. Because of decisions made early in the pandemic, they explained, they didn't have the data needed to implement Lowell's merit-based admissions policy. Notably, this rank-choice lottery system is the same one the Board is actively working to overhaul for elementary school admissions because, according to SFUSD and the Board, the system has failed at racially integrating SFUSD.

At a public board meeting on October 13 many people objected to, among other things, the sudden announcement and quickly approaching vote. Board members Jenny Lam and Stevon Cook expressed concerns over the timing of the proposal and lack of transparency. The debate quickly broadened to address long-standing concerns about the Lowell admissions policy, which some people believe furthered racist outcomes and enabled a toxic school culture. Commissioners López and Sanchez declared that the time might be right to discuss a more long-term solution to the Lowell admissions process.

Regardless of these concerns, on October 20th, eleven days after announcing their intentions, the Board unanimously approved this interim, one-year change to the Lowell admissions criteria.

On January 20 2021, during an on-line anti-racism lesson at Lowell, the school's "Padlet" system was hacked and a class of students were exposed to racist slurs and pornographic images. People across the City and beyond were universally outraged, and district leaders vowed to investigate the incident.

On January 26th, a public Board meeting became an hours-long, highly contentious debate during which people emphatically expressed vastly divergent points of view. Many condemned the school and pushed for the admissions policy to be permanently changed, linking the incident to a long history of racist acts and marginalizing behavior at the school, and accusing school administrators of repeatedly ignoring and under-responding to past incidents. Others decried the change as premature, and the decision-making process as flawed. They further asserted that it would not bring about the desired change of increasing diversity at the school and would destroy the school's rigor and reputation. During the meeting several Commissioners made clear their personal belief that a merit-based admissions process is inherently racist.

Shortly afterwards, on February 2nd, Commissioners Collins, Lopez, and Alexander introduced a resolution at a special meeting to permanently eliminate merit-based admissions at Lowell, presenting the change as part of a resolution of the Padlet incident. The Resolution also called for an in-depth equity audit and action plan to be developed in collaboration with social justice/civil rights organizations and Black student leaders.

On February 9, twenty days after the racist incident, seven days after introducing the resolution, and following three hours of debate, the Board voted to permanently change the 55-year old Lowell admissions policy. At that same meeting they spent two hours considering, and ultimately rejecting, the candidacy of a well-qualified parent for one of eight available volunteer spots on the Parent Advisory Council without recognizing him at the meeting or asking him one question. The board finally turned to the topic of reopening seven hours into the meeting.

During the public comments part of this meeting one parent spoke directly to the issue of misplaced priorities: **"It's clear to me that kids just aren't being prioritized,"** said Jennifer Sey, a San Francisco parent of two kids in public schools and a member of the grassroots group Reopen Schools California. **"I don't understand how you couldn't spend the entire nine hours focused on opening. What could be more urgent than getting schools opened for our kids?"**

Update: On March 3rd the district shared the outcome of the investigation by the Department of Technology, who worked with the Padlet CEO and Padlet engineers to trace 5 student IP addresses, none of which were related to Lowell (the perpetrators could have used a VPN, however). The SFUSD Legal department says that the incident did not reach a level sufficient to be named a crime, so at the moment there is no resolution or known responsible party. The administration says it will try to communicate with the Lowell Community and the BSU with further updates when possible.

Misplaced Priority #3: Semantics over Solutions

At several points during the year, Commissioners attempted to recast the situation instead of solving it.

In a January 21, 2021 article about mounting evidence of racial and socioeconomic disparities in learning loss Commissioner López declared that students in distance learning "are learning more about their families and their cultures, spending more time with each other." "They're just having different learning experiences than the ones we currently measure," she said, "and the loss is a comparison to a time when we were in a different space."

More recently, Commissioner Collins was heard discouraging the use of the term "learning loss" when describing the academic impact of distance learning. During a March 16 meeting she appears to remind Ritu Khanna, SFUSD Chief of Research, Planning & Assessment, to use "learning change" instead. This is similar to her insistence that the expression "achievement gap" be replaced with "achievement opportunity."

This focus on semantics belittles the experiences of our students. Whatever words we choose — *problems, losses, gaps, opportunities, or change* — the Board needs to acknowledge there are real-life difficulties facing real-life students and work to solve them rather than rename them.