

**PETOSKEY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
STAFF INTERVIEWS
DR. MICHAEL WASHBURN
APRIL 6, 2022**

My name is Mike Washburn. I am a retired Superintendent, having served for 27 years in three public school districts: Garden City, Michigan. Boulder Valley Public Schools in Boulder, Colorado. Forest Hills Public Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I retired from Forest Hills in 2006.

I began working as an education consultant in 1997 and started working with Petoskey Public Schools when Dr. John Jeffrey first became Superintendent. I continued after his retirement, when Dr. John Scholten succeeded him, facilitating superintendent evaluations, governance sessions with the Board of Education and work sessions. So I have a long history with the district.

On February 24, 2022, I was contacted by Board President, Mary Ling. I had worked with her earlier as she was a Board member during the previous administration. She asked if I was still consulting. I replied in the affirmative and that I have a contract with Char-Em ISD.

She contacted Jeff Crouse, Superintendent at Char-Em, and he authorized me to work with the district. I let Mary know the only person on the staff I know is Cal Prins as we worked together in Forest Hills and that I had no contact with anyone since Dr. Scholten retired, with the exception of meeting Superintendent Parker once, shortly after he was hired.

Mary shared that the Board had been experiencing some challenges at Board meetings and were hearing different points of view of conflicts from parents and staff members. She asked if I would meet with administrators, teachers and support staff and ask them about the culture: What is working well and what needs to be changed?

I shared with her the process I use: Private interviews open to all staff members—promised confidentiality at my end by both names and examples that would identify the source— present my findings to the Board at their discretion in the format they want. I immediately met with Superintendent, Chris Parker and told him what I'd been asked to do—that I would keep him informed of what I heard from staff members in a general way.

Mary and I both sent letters to the entire staff outlining the process and. Because of the large initial reaction from staff members, several days were set aside so anyone who wanted to participate, could do that. Available to participants were one on one private interviews on site, the same private interviews off site, emails to the consultant, text messages in the same format and private calls. All forms were used by staff members to share information.

On March 14, 15 and 16, staff interviews were held in all schools and offsite sessions were held in a conference room at the Perry Hotel in the evenings of March 14 and 15. In addition, two zoom meetings for individual participation were held on March 21. In total, 138 staff members were personally interviewed and another 27 sent texts/emails or made personal calls. The total participants included 165 staff members. As the total of district employees in these categories (administrators, teachers and support staff) totals 281, there were 116 who did not participate.

Members of the Board were not interviewed as President Ling did not want Board members to inflict any biases on the consultant. As the design was to interview staff members but not parents or the community, comments made by staff members who also had children in the district; only their statements as staff members were reflected.

While I had discussions with the Superintendent and Executive Team, their comments are not reflected in this report. I will cover that process later in the report.

My plan tonight is to share findings from interviews with building staffs, including principals, teachers and support staff from each school. I've condensed the findings into level reports: High school, middle school and elementary schools. Then ending with conclusions and recommendations.

As noted earlier, personal names of participants are not mentioned nor are examples that would identify them. I started each interview asking staff members to share with me strengths/successes in the buildings and district cultures as well as concerns, both in as much detail as they felt comfortable sharing. Each interview only lasted for 15 minutes so some staff members followed up with written comments.

While the intent expressed in both letters to the staff was to measure the culture and climate, a number of people perceived this to be getting information to the Board for the Superintendent's evaluation. While that was not the purpose, many participants shared both positive and negative characteristics of the Superintendent, relating them to district culture. They did the same about their building principals, members of the Executive Team and the Board of Education.

None of these statements should be taken as facts, rather opinions shared by staff members. In addition, rather than applying percentages of staff members in support/non-support in each group, a total will be shared at the end as different numbers of staff members were interviewed in each group. Summaries of comments include:

PETOSKEY HIGH SCHOOL

Staff members I interviewed were divided into two groups in their perceptions of the culture in both the district and high school. The principal, her administrative team, and office personnel place great value and support in both the Superintendent and Executive Team. They believe the culture in both the district and high school is very positive, but noted some members of the staff will likely disagree.

The Superintendent was described as smart, highly organized, having high expectations with a "no-nonsense" approach at problem solving. They, and some teachers and support staff, believe Chris has tackled tough issues, as well as dealing with unprecedented concerns like Covid, a band/personnel situation in their school and an administrator placed on leave.

They worry that the Board of Education will not continue to support the leadership team, as they witness changes at Board meetings and some Board members now going directly to staff members with questions about the culture.

These staff members believe there were too few structures in place when the new Superintendent arrived, especially in the curriculum. The Director of Teaching and Learning has brought both consistent structure and higher expectations for staff in an effort to improve student growth. They also think these new standards had support from the Board after the Superintendent was hired.

Supporters shared positive examples of the Superintendent and Executive Team filling in at the high school when the principal and one of the assistant principal's were on leave. Staff members got to know them well and were very impressed with the "hands on" work they did. They believe the principal has great access to the Superintendent and central office and high school needs are considered quickly.

However, a larger percentage of those interviewed, told me the culture in the district is very broken and some of that group see the same at the high school. They list a top-down decision-making process, little involvement with teacher input and training and that many individuals fear asking questions and, especially, challenging decisions made by the administration. While often second hand, there is a strong belief that staff members who ask difficult questions or challenge the new rules are treated poorly: Yelled at, reassigned, forced out, etc.

In particular, the long process for reinstating two band teachers was cited as very disruptive. Because the matter involved attorneys and legal issues, I have not described the fallout mentioned but most interviewed felt badly the timelines were, in their words, very excessive.

While a majority of the staff values and supports their principal, some members of this group feel their principal is using a similar leadership style, resulting in a divided culture within the high school.

A common theme for those believing the district culture is very low, was the implementation of "too many new programs, too fast." Some veteran staff members, in particular, have seen an abrupt change in the last 2 1/2 years from long standing traditions. They understand that Covid protocols were disruptive, too, but believe the change in central office leadership has created the low morale and broken culture. Those of this group who believe more structure was needed were concerned about the implementation process.

Many perceive that the administration believes high school curricular programming and the way staff members operate were broken and needed to be fixed. As a result, they do not feel valued. All teachers interviewed took great pride in their teaching performances, backed up by positive evaluations. Some resented being labeled as unwilling to change but want to be a part of the process to be able to support new initiatives and teaching styles. They want collaboration with the administrative team.

Many of those interviewed stated that significant numbers of staff who were/are retiring early or leaving the district for other positions are because of the culture becoming

negative. Also, they believe the Full Value Agreement, the cornerstone of core values that has been in place for many years, is no longer followed—especially the SPEAK UP provision. Communication from central office usually does not give staff members a heads up. As a result, they often learn about changing dynamics (like masking) at the same time as all community members, which puts them in an awkward spot when contacted by parents.

Most staff members from this group blame the major problems on the Superintendent. They see his leadership style as unpredictable and believe those who don't agree with his decisions get targeted for some form of punishment, like being berated or involuntarily transferred.

Another major concern expressed is the lower expectations for student behavior. Whether the policy of full inclusion has impacted the standards, or other factors, it is apparent to this group that consequences for poor student behaviors have been significantly lowered. Sometimes staff members feel caught in the middle with their peers as some teachers try to enforce behavior standards while others do not. Most believe there are few consequences for unacceptable student behaviors, ultimately impacting other students who begin modeling those adverse behaviors.

Teacher aides and secretaries are highly valued by all staff members interviewed. They hope that low compensation for this group will be addressed system-wide. It was also noted that many aides are used as substitutes in different areas, making consistency for their support of teachers difficult to count on.

Staff members in this group are hopeful the Board of Education will hear their voices and direct some needed changes. To many, the Board is seen as a problem, not exerting leadership in defining expectations and roles for administrators and the direction of the district. By not visiting schools or asking for staff input, this group is conflicted about the Board in one of two ways: Do they agree with the direction of the district and how people are treated? OR, are they misled and not knowledgeable about how the district is being run?

PETOSKEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Universally, the principal, teachers and support staff love the culture in the middle school. They consider themselves as a family and on an island compared to how they perceive the district's culture. They are proud of how they all pulled together during the pandemic and believe the Superintendent did a good job in managing so many uncertainties.

Staff members who participated are very torn on district culture. A few are great supporters of the Superintendent and Executive Team and believe more structure has been needed for a long time. As they characterize low morale, they cite veteran staff members as being resistant to changes and admire Chris for taking on tough issues that were largely ignored before he became Superintendent. They perceive and worry that the Board of Education, who selected the Superintendent and supported his vision, are now turning against him because of criticisms from the public and "loud" staff members.

A large majority of participants believe low morale and a declining district culture have resulted in the past 2 1/2 years with a change in administration. They were excited when Superintendent Parker was hired, especially because his credentials made them believe that a "whole child" philosophy would more emerge. They expected a greater balance between academic rigor and emotional and physical health needs of children.

Most staff members liked the beginning of the new leadership. They saw a likable and dynamic Superintendent in his first year. He was highly visible, often a cheerleader for all schools in the district, very smart, driven and passionate about instruction and wanted to put more structures in place. However, once he and the the new Executive Team were established, during the last part of the first year and continuing to the present day, many have lost confidence in the leadership of the Superintendent and Executive Team.

This large group shared similar concerns with their counterparts at the high school. They believe too many changes were made too rapidly, and without the knowledge and support of the people who had to perform these expectations. This was a contrast from the Superintendent's interviews, they shared, where they believed Chris was going to take a longer approach of learning, assessing and evaluating before making any big changes.

Their opinions were that a long standing tradition of collaboration, was evolving into a more secretive top-down management style. In prior times, they were able to contact central office administrators and secretaries who would hear their concerns and work with them and their principals to make changes or better understand new directions. They believe the new chain of command structure does not allow that to happen.

These staff members have seen the Board of Education make major changes in their collective style. While they understand and support channeling problems through the chain of command, they miss seeing Board members in their schools and the opportunities to talk with them informally. It is recognized that Covid protocols created natural barriers for Board visitations, but believe a changing culture among the Board and administration is a greater cause for concern.

On the other hand, staff members in both groups strongly support their principal. They believe he understands their needs, keeps them uplifted even during these difficult times and goes to bat for them. But, they believe many times his hands are tied by central office. As a result, he becomes the "messenger of bad news" but they respect that he never blames his superiors for decisions they believe are made above him.

Loss of trust in the Superintendent and Executive Team predominates with a large majority of those providing input. They believe that statements made to the public at Board meetings and through social media are not a reflection of what happens in their school. They see the Superintendent as having two personas: One when dealing with the public and another when dealing with staff members. Many shared examples of perceived mistreatment with some being demeaned, yelled at, discouraged, etc.

While there is great value in data collection, many worry that this business-like atmosphere will result in a loss of the caring culture that has existed for years. They said test scores are important but so are kids and staff members feeling good about themselves.

Both groups greatly value aides and para pros and hope the district will look at their working conditions and pay structure.

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
CENTRAL
LINCOLN
OTTAWA**

SHERIDAN

There were few divisions among the four elementary school participants in how they viewed the culture. As a result, rather than singling out particular schools and repeating many of the same examples, the four schools will be lumped together for this reporting.

All of the Elementary Schools perceive their building cultures to be healthy but the district culture very broken. Participants shared many of the same concerns as listed by the high school and middle school participants. There are some differences, though, that I will highlight.

Each staff places great value in their respective principals. While one staff currently has an interim principal, they all feel each building culture is family-like. Principals, teachers and support staff members value each other and do everything they can to help one another. When challenges emerge, they circle the wagons and do everything possible to support unity. They all love their kids, believe their own school is the best in the district and rave about parent support.

Many were very excited when the Board hired the current Superintendent. As they see themselves as nurturing the younger students, they believed they had a great ally in new Superintendent Parker because of his background. In the beginning they observed him as a high visibility, high energy leader. He was frequently in buildings and approachable.

Soon, the Covid pandemic struck and a new reality emerged. Chris took immediate control of the uncharted way schools had to be run. Unlike some neighboring districts, staff members felt valued, supported and their safety, along with their students, was at the top of the pinnacle. Communication was outstanding about Covid decisions and they felt safe in an unsafe world.

However, as the first year wore on and the second year began, they saw less and less of the Superintendent they had imagined. Many told me the central office was dismantled and a totally new administrative team emerged along with new support staff members in central office, losing those they had relied upon in the past.

While they believed at the beginning of the new regime, that Petoskey Schools were highly valued by central office, they soon began to believe that actions, not words, showed them they were perceived as broken and needed to be fixed by the new team.

A quick example was the addition of the Director of Special Education, who brought in a total change in philosophy, moving the schools to full inclusion. Many felt blindsided and not equipped to deal with high needs special education students now “immersed” in their classrooms.

When they tried to get help in both understanding and training from central office, the answer became: “Follow the chain of command. Do your jobs. This approach is best for kids. The research says that.” It was perceived as a totally top-down decision. They weren’t sure if the mandate came from the new Director or Superintendent. While teachers did their best to positively make this change work, they were not prepared to deal with students who were physical with them and sometimes destructive in their behaviors.

Each staff shared examples: Descriptions of problems included single students daily hitting staff members, throwing chairs in classrooms, yelling and loud profanity. Some teachers and aides are afraid and believe students in other classrooms become fearful when they witness this behavior. Clearing entire classrooms has happened a number of times.

While the staffs are very receptive to full inclusion, they believe it doesn't work with all children. Attempts to get help seem thwarted and the end result is a lowering of morale, even among staffs who love their school and colleagues. Attempts to get help from the office are not fruitful. Teachers believe their principal's hands are tied by central office. An example was shared that sometimes principals had to sit outside classroom doors to help when major disruptions happened.

Classroom teachers worry they aren't trained to help very needy students. They are also frustrated that general education students in their classes are being short-changed with instruction and attention. Special education teachers shared they have seen children who were very effective in specialized rooms, moving backward in their performances and behaviors.

Another impact is the worsening behavior by general education students who had not had discipline problems before. Teachers and aides believe this is a result of them seeing bad behavior that results in few or no consequences—then they do the same things. Staff members feel badly for their principals and the disproportionate amount of time they now have to spend on discipline issues with little say about consequences.

Aides and para pros share frustrations, too. Most feel little value toward them outside of their schools. While they have job descriptions, many times they are forced to do different jobs, usually with little notice. They have identified a lack of substitutes being part of the problem but don't believe their needs are understood externally.

Teachers and support staff members alike are worried seasoned aides have and will continue to leave. While the group has no representation, many examples were shared about their pay schedule. Regardless of their classifications, even those holding teacher credentials, are paid the same. Whether a person has worked in the district for twenty years or is a brand new hire, they all make the same hourly wage.

Several shared examples of individuals who loved their jobs leaving the district because they couldn't support themselves economically. It was even stated that local fast food restaurants pay a higher salary than their's. They hope the Board and administration will review their status and help in the future.

A second major concern shared by this group dealt with curriculum changes. They shared many examples of new instructional programs being forced upon them with little knowledge, no input and haphazard training. A significant perception by those interviewed expressed their beliefs that science and social studies can no longer be taught by classroom teachers. The rationale they were told was that these subjects are taught in the new reading program and therefore would be duplicated if taught separately. Specialists in the two areas do not believe the content is nearly the same and predict future testing results will demonstrate that.

Concerns were raised about the new reading curriculum and frustrations that phonics, writing and handwriting were no longer a part of their teaching practices. They provided many examples.

Many comments were also made about the elimination of committees that previously allowed them to interact with central office members and the Superintendent. They used as examples the prior "4 on 4" group and PLC's.

A third major concern from participants who believe the district's culture has been greatly damaged is a NO RETENTION directive aimed at kindergarten students. While the goal has always been to move students to the first grade, there have been exceptions made, when the

classroom teacher and parents are in agreement. Staff members shared examples where the teacher and parents wanted to hold the child back—for solid reasons but the requests were always denied. When asked for the process to request retention, they explained a burdensome process for parents wanting their children retained but did not know of any who had been granted the exception.

As participants in this group discussed, they believe many people have left and will continue leaving the district totally because of the worsening culture. They have also lost faith in the hiring process. In past administrations, for example, they were deeply engaged in hiring their new principals. With several principal openings now, one school shared an example of how their new principal was to be hired.

Their former principal, had taken a medical leave and was replaced by an interim principal. Staff members liked both and felt encouraged that they would be involved in the interview process for another interim principal—then later, a permanent principal. They became quickly discouraged when only one candidate was presented for interviews and questions they had helped draft were changed shortly before the interview.

These committee members and soon all of the staff interviewed believed a decision had already been reached (by the Superintendent and Executive Team) and they were being used as a prop—a way to tell parents that the staff was involved in the selection, when they believed they clearly were not. Confidence was also lost when the “interim” tag had been eliminated and their new principal would be permanent.

As a result of this example, shared to many across the district, other elementary school staffs are worried their new principals will come to them without any input. A common perception among elementary participants in this process is that central office administrators decide who will be hired and line up people with similar leadership styles of their own; which, if accurate will result in even more problems and cultural negativity.

While large majorities of elementary participants have lost confidence and trust in the Superintendent and Executive Team, they also have great concerns about the Board of Education. In the past, Board members frequently visited their schools and often volunteered as parents. While teachers didn’t believe they crossed the line between teachers and the Board, they enjoyed a healthy relationship without feeling consequences from their superiors.

Now, the Board is perceived to be in the same boat with the Superintendent. Some think the Board members have been directed by the Superintendent to not visit schools, talk with them or their principals. Others, believe the Board and Superintendent are linked together in their common mission of “fixing” them. Still others, think Board members have not been told the truth.

Examples were shared from those attending Board meetings that the Superintendent will routinely say about a problem: “This is the first I’ve heard of this” when they know he has been deeply involved in the problem—student discipline was the most common example stated.

Regardless of the realities, the Board has lost great confidence and support from many elementary staff members who were interviewed. The lone exception mentioned was the change in visiting patterns in the last few weeks from some of the Board members. They were greatly welcomed to the schools.

The final concern raised at all of the elementary schools was a collective perception that the Superintendent and Executive Team have treated staff members very poorly. While most examples shared were either hearsay or witnessed confrontation involving others, there were some direct examples of yelling, perceived involuntary transferring and other examples. Regardless, the perception of mistreatment of staff members is very pervasive by those interviewed.

RETIREEES/INDIVIDUALS MEETING OFFSITE

More than 30 current staff members and 4 retired staff members met with the consultant either offsite or in zoom meetings. All were one on one. Their comments were added to the levels in this report. However, some extreme examples were used that were requested to be confidential. That request was honored.

A large percentage of this group believed the district culture is now very negative and several participants said they had either directly retired because of how they were treated or were intending to retire this year or as soon as they can. The new leadership regime was cited in each case as the reason.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It needs to be noted and clarified that I was asked to listen to staff members and report what I heard, not placing judgments on the comments. As an outside facilitator, statements I heard and reported should not be accepted as total facts. Chris and his team have not had a chance to hear the concerns in this much detail and share their opinions. I did keep Chris updated about issues that were addressed through phone calls and emails. The Board, too, received some criticisms that have probably not been heard in this amount of detail.

The original request of helping get a third party independent point of view of the culture in the district was far more expansive than thought. As I have the perspective of working with the Petoskey Schools for more than 20 years (with the exception of the last three), it is obvious there is significant stress among most staff members interviewed. Some is probably due to the pandemic and time of year.

Many districts are experiencing disruptions at Board meetings while record numbers of administrators and teachers are retiring and/or leaving the profession. The period between the Christmas holidays and spring break is usually a tough time for staff, parents and students. And, 116 staff members were not interviewed.

While I facilitated evaluations with the two former superintendents, I have not done that with Chris. Since I didn't interview Board members in this assignment, I don't know collectively what you have done with governance or how your Board Policies and Administrative Guidelines have applied. I haven't read the evaluations, but have heard the first two years presented Highly Effective ratings for the Superintendent and his contract was extended for two additional years.

I do believe from working in more than 75 Michigan school districts that the Board and Superintendent have to be in sync with their working conditions and expectations. There may now be a wide gap based upon the perceptions shared by participants.

Regardless of next steps taken by the Board, it will be imperative to all parties to take time to review staff opinions of the culture, good and bad, and do everything possible to get back on track with a collaborative team including all employees, regardless of their jobs. Based upon these staff summaries, the Board and Superintendent need to meet, sooner rather than later, and discuss in details the staff reactions from this report.

Specifically, areas that need to be addressed are:

- Expectations for treatment of staff members
- Following the chain of command in decision-making
- Staff hiring procedures
- Special education inclusion and the impact on staff/student safety
- Special education and Title programs case loads and reporting
- Student behavior concerns at all levels
- Understanding of kindergarten retention policy
- Working conditions and salary structure of aides and paraprofessionals
- Processing of sensitive issues: Use band program decisions as road map
- Board of Education role in school operations
- Board of Education/Superintendent governance
- Developing and sharing results with staff members

As my assignment was to give you an independent report, this is it. There are two different perceptions I heard from participants. One group believes the district is in great shape. They believe the Superintendent and Executive Team are bringing needed structure and systems into daily operations. To them, the pushback is troublesome but not surprising. Teachers have been able to do "their own things," so naturally they don't like being told what to do or criticisms of their teaching methods.

This group worried that the Board of Education is regressing in their leadership and respective roles. They are listening to a small number of parents and staff members who are loud and influential. This group wants to see the Board back the Superintendent and refrain from getting involved into daily operations.

The other group, much larger from those choosing to participate in the project (about 90% of those interviewed), believes the culture in the district is very broken and morale extremely low. Many shared examples of problems with how decisions from the central office are made. They view a WE/THEY divide with the We, being their respective schools and the They being central office. Specifically their major concerns are:

- Student discipline
- Communication from central office to staff

Impact of the full special education inclusion changes
How people are treated by central office administrators
Loss of the Full Value Agreement
Numerous curricular changes and long range vision/impact
Kindergarten retention policy
Staff training for new programs
Where does the Board stand from their top level?

Having worked with several of you Board members previously, I know how much you love the district and want only the best for your students, staff and parents. Until this project, I didn't know the Superintendent or Executive team but in talking with them, believe they have the same goals. My advice is to take the bull by the horns, develop a plan for improvement and transparently share the next steps and objectives with the staff and community in an open way.

As in all things, it will take time to change perceptions, especially when trust is involved. I learned a long time ago, that trust takes a long time to build but can be lost in an instant. After meeting with so many great staff members and the leadership team, I know you and they all want the same thing: For Petoskey kids to get the best education possible and learn to become outstanding citizens.

I know the original charge was to include the Superintendent and Executive Team in these interviews and report. While I met with all four individuals, it was early in the process. When I sent the Superintendent the comments I gleaned from our meetings, he did not authorize me to share that information, believing it was confidential between us and especially, if it was to be shared in a public report he had not seen. I agreed and decided it would only be fair, allowing himself and the Executive Team to understand the comments made by the staff and to report their positions directly to the Board.

I can tell you the Superintendent, in my opinion, has high expectations and believes he has done a very credible job as your Superintendent. He wants what's best for kids and has a strong vision of how to get the best academic results. His Executive Team members are his strongest supporters and believe they all are doing what the Board has expected.

You should also be encouraged that so many staff members were willing to take a risk in meeting with someone they didn't know and trusting they could safely share their thoughts. Those interviewed wanted the Board to get a true picture: Good and Bad.

Now, the spotlight goes to the Board and Superintendent. I'm sure some of what you just heard was hard to hear, but I promised you an unvarnished version of what I was told by your staff. These are not my interpretations but what I heard directly from principals teachers and support staff members.

While I deliberately left out percentages of those believing the culture is fine and those telling me the opposite, in double counting responses from interviews and other direct contacts, 10% of the participants believe the culture is healthy and 90% believe it is broken.

This completes my report. I will be happy to answer any questions from the Board and also provide any additional assistance you require.

I will also meet with the Superintendent and Executive Team at any time to provide insight and assistance from my 27 years as a Superintendent and more than 20 years consulting in Petoskey. As I shared with Chris, my goal is always to help Superintendents succeed and have had a strong record of that in my Char-Em consulting.

As an annual legal requirement directs the Board to evaluate the Superintendent, I will not be involved, as earlier requested, because of this process. My recommendation is to use an MASB consultant as facilitator. The contents of this report should give both parties a starting point for discussion. Good luck!

Dr. Michael Washburn