

Right-wing majority on Colorado school board fires superintendent to attack COVID mitigations

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At a special meeting of the Douglas County School District board of directors at its Castle Rock, Colorado headquarters February 4, the four-member conservative majority voted to fire school superintendent Corey Wise. Wise, who had worked in the district for 25 years, had been appointed superintendent last spring.

The ousting of Wise was the culmination of a week of turmoil in the district, as the board's new right-wing majority, elected last November, moved to purge the superintendent whom they viewed as supportive of mask mandates and other COVID mitigation policies.

In a public Zoom meeting on January 31, the three members of the seven-member board's minority, Elizabeth Hanson, Susan Meek and David Ray, accused members of the conservative majority, including board president Mike Peterson and vice-president Christy Williams, of confronting Wise with the choice of resigning or being ousted by a board vote.

According to Ray, the issuing of the ultimatum to Wise was in violation of Colorado's open meetings law, which requires that whenever two or more board members discuss a district-related matter, it needs to first have 24 hours' notice and the meeting must be open to the public to observe.

According to a cpr.org report, "The move to get rid of the superintendent took community members and the three minority board members by surprise. There was no board discussion, either public or in a private executive session, no notice of the board majority's intentions, and no prior discussion with Wise about any problems with his job performance, according to Hanson, Meek and Ray."

Furthermore, the minority board members said that Will Trachman, an attorney brought on board by the majority, did not communicate with the board minority or with

district legal counsel regarding the meeting with Wise. Hanson, who is an attorney, said that she would file an ethics complaint against Trachman for contractual and ethical violations.

The next day, Peterson claimed implausibly in a statement, "Last week's conversation," i.e., the ultimatum and threat, "was to provide our superintendent with information needed to participate in an ongoing discussion. I will continue to engage all board directors on this matter."

That day, Thursday, February 3, hundreds of Douglas County educators requested substitutes, resulting in some 1,500 teacher absences, and forcing the closure of schools. Over a thousand teachers, parents and students braved freezing weather—and threats of retaliation—to hold a lively protest at the school board headquarters in Castle Rock, the county seat, with many holding signs in support of Wise. An online petition to retain Wise had garnered nearly 9,000 signatures by then.

At the February 4 meeting, the minority's motion to postpone the meeting was defeated. Although Peterson had said that the meeting would be public, and the minority had called for public comment, the board president claimed, "Due to the meeting last Monday and numerous emails, we have had plenty of public comment."

There followed some debate and a plea from Wise—"Let me prove, and if I don't, then come out and have that conversation, but please don't do it over a weekend"—a closed executive session was called at which the foregone conclusion was carried out and Wise was sacked.

In an indication of the right-wing majority's determination to oust the superintendent, Peterson acknowledged the unpopularity of the action. "Just because a leader is loved and respected doesn't mean he

has the skills, the vision and the capabilities to lead the large district,” Peterson said.

After the vote, Hanson said, “I need to be very clear that this decision was not about performance in any way, and that this is politics and its ugliest and purest and most destructive form,” while Ray called the decision “the day that you have devastated the education of over 60,000 kids.”

With a population of more than 350,000, Douglas County comprises the southernmost suburbs of the Denver metropolitan area. It is just south of Littleton, Colorado, site of the 1999 school massacre. It has a 2-1 majority of Republicans among registered voters but went only narrowly for Donald Trump over Joe Biden in the 2020 elections.

In November 2021, however, a right-wing slate swept the school board elections, in the midst of confusion, anger and disruption caused by school closures, conflicts, lawsuits and fiery public meetings over mask mandates and other issues such as charter schools and the unsupported claim that the Douglas County school board was forcing critical race theory on unsuspecting children.

The conservative slate, cynically calling themselves Kids First—Peterson, Williams, Becky Myers and Kaylee Winegar—postured as advocates of “parental control” and won four seats on the seven-member board after a heated campaign. The slate was well-financed with “dark money” whose sources they were not required to reveal.

In addition, the slate, through its campaign manager Holly Osborne, was presented as not being ultra-conservative, but just wanting to achieve “some balance” on the board. In fact, Osborne claimed that the slate was open to such measures as boosting teacher pay through property tax increases and opposed school vouchers.

Once they were elected, however, the new majority’s agenda has not been aimed at “balance.”

On December 7, the majority voted to hire Trachman over the objections over costs and other concerns.

On December 8, the board passed a resolution allowing parents to opt out of mask wearing. State health officials’ scrapping of the standard for classification of an outbreak from two to five cases over two weeks for schools meant that undercounting would result.

According to a westword.com report: “The overall number of new or tweaked entries in the CDPHE’s January 26 outbreaks survey came in at 211 — lower than the 237 on January 19, but more than triple the sixty counted just over a month earlier, on December 15. At present, 1,252 outbreaks are under active investigation,

compared to 1,090 on January 19 and 889 on January 12. Of the new entries, 135 sites have experienced at least one prior outbreak.”

Last week, outbreaks occurred in thirteen Douglas County schools.

In a January video presentation with two other local officials, Douglas County Commissioner Abe Laydon and County Health Board president Doug Benevento, Peterson denounced policymakers who “react emotionally to case counts with fear, and institute one-size-fits-all mandates and restrictions.”

In the same video, Commissioner Laydon stated that from now on, severity, not case counts, will set policy, and urged health care workers who had left the field to come back to work. He cited the agreement of policymakers from both the Democratic and Republican parties, including President Biden and Colorado Governor Jared Polis, that COVID-19 had become endemic, not pandemic.

Benvenuto, making the claim that the Omicron variant is “less severe” than Delta, declared, “Until we see significant severity metrics, such restrictions will not happen in Douglas County” and “instead of reacting to case counts, we will respond to severity. Instead of responding with fear-driven mandates and restrictions, we will respond with courage and freedom of health care choice.”

The school board minority offers nothing in the way of an alternative to the right-wing campaign that led to the firing of Superintendent Wise. Tied to the Democrats and the trade union apparatus, all they can offer working class parents and students is the failed vaccine-only policy that has helped spawn more vaccine-resistant variants. The overriding goal, as it is with the board majority, is to keep parents going to work while their children attend unsafe schools.

Parents and students in Colorado and elsewhere are showing the signs of growing resistance to both approaches to the pandemic. What are needed are democratically run organizations—rank-and-file committees—that act independently of the bourgeois parties and their trade union adjuncts.



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