

Black Women for a Better Education

PPS Board of Directors
Room 239, Administration Building
341 S. Bellefield Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

June 1, 2020

Re: Contract Renewal for Superintendent Anthony Hamlet

Dear PPS Board of Directors:

Please find attached a letter from a coalition of Black women who are affiliated with PPS as parents, alumni, former employees, retirees, partners, and concerned community members. We meet regularly with the intent of ensuring that Black children in this region receive the consistent high-quality education they both deserve and need. **To that end, after careful thought, we have outlined in the letter an argument against renewing the contract of Superintendent Anthony Hamlet.** As the letter is quite detailed, we offer a summary below.

Grounds for not renewing the 5-year contract of Superintendent Anthony Hamlet

1. Organizational Leadership
 - a. Excessive loss of talented, veteran team members with institutional knowledge
 - b. High turnover of the leadership team
 - c. Failure to become a “transformational leader”
 - d. Long delays in or failure to fill critical staff positions
2. Financial Management
 - a. Excessive spending on extraneous central office staff, high-paid consultants, and on educational technology contracts
 - b. Approximately \$25,000 per month for out-of-town professional development with questionable returns on investment
 - c. Unauthorized trip to Cuba at taxpayers’ expense with minimal accountability for the action from the board
 - d. No-bid contracts for clients of a company for which he is a paid consultant
3. COVID-19 Crisis Management
 - a. Students lost weeks of instruction as the district scrambled to develop a learning plan
 - b. Students with disabilities did not receive instruction for close to two months, violating IEPs and 504 plans
 - c. Low resolution, low instruction printed learning packets distributed to families who had to find ways to pick them up
 - d. Inequitable distribution of technology, widening the district access and opportunity gap

- e. Ineffective leadership and communication on the district's plans during the COVID-19 pandemic
- 4. Instructional Excellence & Safe and Healthy School Environments
 - a. Test scores remain stagnant at best
 - b. The achievement gap between Black and White students remains broad
 - c. Access to and success in AP courses for Black children is limited
 - d. Expulsion rates for Black children are in the top 10 in the Commonwealth
 - e. Black students' high referral rate to the police
 - f. Equity plan devoid of meaningful metrics
- 5. Professionalism
 - a. Dr. Hamlet has a reputation for being aloof and inaccessible
 - b. History of cancelling important meetings or sending surrogates to key meetings
 - c. Public rift with government leaders and dissatisfaction with his performance by the philanthropic sector
 - d. Questionable qualifications and past performance

Sincerely,

Black Women for a Better Education

Attachments:

Expanded letter

Full signature page

Supportive footnotes

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Pittsburgh, PA 15213

June 1, 2020

Dear PPS Board of Directors,

We are a group of Black women PPS parents, alumni, former employees, retirees, and concerned community members committed to ensuring that all Black children in this region receive the high-quality education they deserve. **We are writing to urge you to vote against renewing Superintendent Anthony Hamlet's contract. We are in serious times and we need a real leader for this region.** We believe that Dr. Hamlet has not led the district successfully in the areas of: organizational leadership, financial management, providing safe and healthy school environments, and instructional excellence.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP: Dr. Hamlet is not an effective organizational leader. Given the multitude of retirements at the executive level shortly after Dr. Hamlet's arrival, he was tasked with rebuilding nearly his entire leadership team. While this should have been an exciting opportunity to bring in the best and brightest local and national talent, it has been a revolving door as the majority of Dr. Hamlet's hires have left either abruptly or under nefarious circumstances (e.g., Chief of Human Resources Milton Walters¹ and Pittsburgh Perry Principal James Cooper²). At his hiring, Dr. Hamlet was touted as a "transformational leader" and he committed to creating an Office of School Transformation to support the schools with the lowest achievement.³ However, it took Dr. Hamlet two years to find a leader for this office,⁴ and Dr. Lynett Hookfin resigned after one year despite agreeing to a three-year contract.⁵ Additionally, under his leadership, the stability of the district has continued to deteriorate. Veteran staff have resigned or their positions have not been renewed, including staff brought to the district by Dr. Hamlet from outside of the region. Most notable are: Deputy Superintendent Anthony Anderson (3 years), Chief Academic Officer Seema Ramji (8 months), Chief Information Officer Scott Gutowski (5 years in this role), Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services Melissa Friez (1 year in this role), and Executive Director of Literacy Kendra Wester (3 years). To date many of these critical roles, including Deputy Superintendent and Chief Information Officer, have not been filled with new hires.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT: While COVID-19 has put the district at risk of facing a large budget shortfall,⁶ Dr. Hamlet's financial management prior to the pandemic has been questionable at best. His excessive spending on extraneous central office staff, high-paid consultants, \$14 million in educational technology contracts,⁷ and nearly \$25,000 a month expenses on out-of-town "professional development" opportunities has crippled the district. There has been little to no return on investment for educators and students.⁸ The investigation into Dr. Hamlet and his staff's unauthorized trip to Cuba came at the taxpayers' expense and resulted in little to no accountability requested of him by members of this board, which is an unacceptable response to such an egregious violation.⁹ This, along with the

conflict of interest created by Dr. Hamlet receiving pay for consulting with a company whose clients received no-bid contracts with the district, should have resulted in his immediate termination.¹⁰

COVID-19 CRISIS MANAGEMENT: Dr. Hamlet's lack of leadership and transparency during the pandemic has left students and their families feeling frustrated. The district's transition to remote learning was unsatisfactory. At a minimum, students lost nearly three weeks of instruction and after eight weeks, students with disabilities are still without specially designed instruction, which is required by their IEPs and 504 plans.¹¹ In comparison, neighboring districts with 1:1 access to technology were able to begin right away.¹² After spending weeks administering a technology needs assessment survey, PPS provided families with low-resolution printed packets that families were responsible for retrieving from schools.¹³ To make matters worse, an inequitable privacy policy was administered whereby CAPA and Sci-Tech students received video-enabled devices and other PPS students received technology with video access disabled.¹⁴ This type of behavior furthers an already widening access and opportunity gap that persists in the district. When asked specific questions about remote learning and the response to COVID-19 in several virtual forums, including those hosted by The Forbes Funds and the Pittsburgh Black Elected Officials Coalition, Dr. Hamlet's circumlocution and vagueness about future plans left viewers even more disappointed than before.¹⁵

INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE & SAFE AND HEALTHY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS: The discriminatory practices against Black students in PPS began long before Dr. Hamlet arrived, and we are not the first group of Black people to bring light to these issues. The complaint brought against the district in 1992 by the Advocates for African-American Students in the Pittsburgh Public Schools was finally acknowledged in 2006 when a Conciliation Agreement was established between the Advocates and the district.¹⁶ The Equity Advisory Panel (EAP), established as part of this agreement, continues to be placated with empty promises by the district.¹⁷ Fourteen years later, no real progress has been made. PSSA test scores have remained stagnant, while Keystone test scores have declined. While there have been minimal academic gains, the gap between Black and White student performance persists and achievement for all students leaves much to be desired.¹⁸ The Gender Equity Commission (GEC) report outlined a number of metrics on which Black children continue to disproportionately underperform compared to their White (and sometimes AMLON) counterparts, including access to and passing of AP courses and tests, enrollment in eighth grade algebra, enrollment in gifted and talented programs, and grade retention rates.¹⁹ Despite passing a K-2 suspension ban that has resulted in an overall decline in suspensions, Black children, especially those with exceptionalities, are still suspended at disproportionate rates.²⁰ The GEC report also stated that Black students are suspended from school and arrested at school at higher rates than White students, and that Black students are referred to the police more often than in 95% of other districts (with Black girls being referred to the police more than in 99% of similar cities).²¹ To "illustrate the District's commitment to moving beyond compliance with the MOU to demonstrate its commitment to achieving true equity," PPS released an equity implementation plan in 2019, *On Track to Equity*, but the plan is devoid of any real metrics and reads more like a list of aspirations.²²

PROFESSIONALISM: Dr. Hamlet's arrival to Pittsburgh was mired in scandal. He was recommended by a search consultant who admittedly did not vet him (and who was not properly vetted himself) after a non-transparent selection process.²³ A review of Dr. Hamlet's credentials revealed instances of

plagiarism, inaccuracies in his employment history, and inflation of his contribution to student outcomes.²⁴ Though Dr. Hamlet was “cleared” of wrongdoing in a rushed investigation at the expense of the taxpayers,²⁵ by then, many of us (including two board members who voted to rescind his contract) had lost confidence that Dr. Hamlet was the right person for the job.²⁶

Despite Dr. Hamlet’s rocky start, many community, foundation, and government leaders calling for his removal were still willing to collaborate (some of whom have signed this letter). However, at nearly every turn, Dr. Hamlet has been evasive, operating the district like an island and further ostracizing the community to the detriment of Pittsburgh children. His public rift with the Mayor and his tendency to cancel meetings (or send subordinates in his place) with key stakeholders who have offered their support has been nothing short of embarrassing.²⁷ Even when Dr. Hamlet addresses or interacts with the public, his answers seem rehearsed, often circumvent real issues and concerns, and are filled with nonsensical education jargon.

As PPS school board directors, it is time for you to admit that Dr. Hamlet’s tenure has been an abject failure and to allow his contract to expire at the end of the 2020-21 school year. Our students and families deserve a superintendent who is competent, honest, innovative, and not the center of continuous negative press. We do not take lightly the implications of Black women asking a school board with a Black president to not renew the contract of a Black superintendent of a school district with majority Black students. We are aware of the optics, however, we demand better for our Black children. We have had enough and our children deserve better. If this democratically elected school board is not courageous enough to do what is right, we will make our discontent known at the ballot box during election time.

Sincerely,

Black Women for a Better Education

Deirdra Bullock, PPS Alumna, PPS Parent, District 1

Tamera Gaines, PPS Parent, District 1

C. Howard, PPS Alumna, District 1

Ashley McClain, PPS Parent and Alumna, District 1

Brandi McNeill, PPS Parent and Alumna, District 1

Danielle Poole, PPS Alumna, District 1

E. Speaks, Retired PPS Employee, District 1

Dorie Taylor, PPS Parent, District 1

University of Pittsburgh Faculty Member, District 1

Former PPS Parent, District 1

Darlise Kearney, Community Member, District 2

T. Matthews, Mentor to 2 PPS Students, Public Health Professional, Concerned Citizen, District 2

Dr. Cheryl Hall-Russell, President & Chief Cultural Consultant, BW3, District 2

Amber Thompson, District 2

PPS Alumna, PPS Community Partner, District 2

Kathi Elliott, Concerned Community Member, District 3

C.C. Robinson, Concerned Community Member, District 3
R. Robinson, Concerned Citizen, Education Advocate, District 3
T. Taloute, Concerned Community Member, District 3
R. DeVaughn, Concerned Community Member, District 5
T. Reed, Parent, District 5
Marilyn Whitelock, Concerned Community Member, District 6
Khamil Scantling, Parent and Business Owner, District 7
Olivia Bennett, Allegheny County Council Member, District 8
Tieisha Collins, PPS Alumna, District 8
J. Harris, Parent, District 8
Kimmil Harris, District 8
Maxine Lewis, Community Member, District 8
Allyce Pinchback-Johnson, Former PPS Employee, PPS Alumna, Parent, District 8
La'Fay Pinchback, Retired PPS Teacher of 38 Years, District 8
S. Reed, Concerned Community Member, District 8
M. Reifman, PPS Parent, PPS Alumna, District 8
Cheryl Ruffin, PPS Alumna, District 8
J. Ruffin, Concerned Community Member, District 8
Maria T. Searcy, PPS EAP and Consultant, Pennsylvania Department of Education, District 8
J. Shealey, PPS Parent, District 8
Alecia Dawn Young, PPS Alumna, Concerned Community Member, District 8
Concerned Community Member, District 8
Cynthia Mendoza, Founder, Brown Mamas, LLC and Homeschooling Parent, District 9
Amanda Neatrou, Parent and Concerned Citizen, District 9
Geraldine Rowe, PPS Alumna District 9
LaTrenda Sherrill, Parent and Concerned Citizen, District 9
School of Education Faculty Member, Duquesne University
S. Jeffrey, Higher Education Professional, Concerned Citizen
S. Bolden, PPS Partner and Concerned Citizen
K. Johnson, PPS Alumna
Lakita Bullock, PPS Alumna
C.S., Juvenile Defense Attorney and Child Advocate, Active PA Bar License
C. Tyler, PPS Alumna and Former PPS Employee
Brandi Fisher, President, Alliance for Police Accountability
Amber McNeal, PPS Parent
J. Shirriel, PPS Alumna, Parent and Concerned Citizen
Evelyn King, Retired PPS School Administrator
Audra Chisom, Former PPS Parent
C. Rue, PPS Parent
PPS Out-of School-Time Partner (Citywide)
D. Arrington, Former Employee of 20 Years, Former PPS Parent, PPS Alumna
Nia Arrington, Youth Power Collective and PPS Alumna
Amanda Wilson
Michelle Walker
Gretchen Generett

Footnotes

- ¹<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/03/27/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-human-resources-chief-Milton-Walters-suspended-fired-district-policy/stories/201803260105>
- ²<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/05/10/Pittsburgh-Perry-Traditional-Academy-principal-suspension-leave-James-Cooper-Anthony-Hamlet/stories/201805090209>
- ³<https://www.wesa.fm/post/pittsburgh-public-schools-tap-florida-educator-top-job#stream/0>
- ⁴<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2018/06/21/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-Anthony-Hamlet-board-hires-Office-of-Transformation/stories/201806210137>
- ⁵[https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/BEDUS37D6433/\\$file/Human%20Resources%20Report%20No.%204857%20-%20July%2024%2C%202019.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/pa/pghboe/Board.nsf/files/BEDUS37D6433/$file/Human%20Resources%20Report%20No.%204857%20-%20July%2024%2C%202019.pdf)
- ⁶<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2020/05/12/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-board-district-budget-revenue-projections-coronavirus/stories/202005120151>
- ⁷<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/05/16/pittsburgh-public-schools-tech-contracts/>
- ⁸<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/08/27/kdka-investigates-gets-action-superintendent-hamlet/>
- ⁹<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/10/16/anthony-hamlet-reprimanded-by-school-board/>
- ¹⁰<https://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/07/10/anthony-hamlet-being-paid-as-consultant-for-erdi>
- ¹¹<https://www.publicsource.org/black-moms-like-me-will-not-be-patient-with-pittsburgh-public-schools-we-need-to-demand-more/>
- ¹²<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2020/04/05/remote-learning-schools-prepared-shutdown-Pittsburgh-Western-PA-school-districts/stories/202004010125>
- ¹³<https://www.pghschools.org/Page/5377>
- ¹⁴<https://www.wesa.fm/post/city-school-district-disabled-cameras-student-issued-computers-because-privacy-concerns#stream/0>
- ¹⁵<https://www.facebook.com/PittsburghPublicSchools/videos/232088091540293/>
- ¹⁶<https://www.pghschools.org/equity>
- ¹⁷<https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2020/02/25/2020-vision-the-decade-for-true-equity-in-pittsburgh-public-schools/>
- ¹⁸<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2019/09/03/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-test-scores-student-achievement-board-Anthony-Hamlet-PSSA/stories/201909030153>
- ^{19,21}https://www.socialwork.pitt.edu/sites/default/files/publication-images/pittsburghs_inequality_across_gender_and_race_09_18_19.pdf
- ²⁰<https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-allegeny/activists-call-on-pittsburgh-public-schools-to-extend-suspension-ban-up-to-5th-grade/>
- ²²<https://www.pghschools.org/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=1416&dataid=14599&FileName=PPS%20Equity%20Report%202019%20NOV%2021%20-%20Final%20with%20Bib.pdf>
- ²³<https://www.wesa.fm/post/pittsburgh-schools-groups-pull-support-call-new-superintendent-search#stream/0>
- ²⁴<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2016/06/03/Discrepancies-on-resume-of-new-Pittsburgh-schools-superintendent-come-to-light/stories/201606030177>

²⁵<https://archive.triblive.com/news/resume-check-in-pittsburgh-superintendent-search-broke-spending-limit/>

²⁶<https://www.post-gazette.com/news/education/2016/06/29/Pittsburgh-Public-Schools-board-votes-to-keep-Anthony-Hamlet-as-superintendent/stories/201606290220>

²⁷<https://www.post-gazette.com/local/city/2018/02/02/bill-Peduto-harsh-words-Pittsburgh-superintendent-anthony-hamlet-pittsburgh-public-schools-strike-vote/stories/201802020157>