

December 9, 2016

ISD Advisory Council members:

I apologize for not being able to make today's meeting, I am on a business trip in Austin, Texas. However, I wanted to share my thoughts with each of you, and that's why I am sending this letter to Paula to read on my behalf.

Interim Superintendent Serena Preston has been long aware of the concerns related to ISD, yet she recently created a School Climate Committee, one that just released a survey on communication accessibility in every department.

The issues related to communication, attitude and respect have been iterated over and over again by various stakeholder groups at ISD and the greater community.

Along these lines, the inclusion of the following two agenda items piqued my interest: "Recruiting deaf/hard of hearing teachers and administrators" and "Building ISD's reputation nationwide."

Time and time again, the Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD), Governor Rauner's Office, Department of Human Services (DHS) and Illinois Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission (IDHHC) blatantly disregarded concerns and recommendations from the Deaf community on how to rebuild ISD's reputation and improve the recruitment of deaf and hard of hearing teachers and administrators.

Our challenges have become exponentially worse with Governor Rauner's administration in place. With the support of Governor Quinn's Chief of Staff, Ryan Croke, Jerry Covell and Paula Chance were able to garner legislative support for HB 2657 and SB 220. Both legislative initiatives were passed during the Spring 2015 Legislative Session, enabling the expedient hiring of qualified educators of the Deaf at ISD.

Despite these efforts, the issues at ISD remain extensive and continue to worsen. These issues include the marginalization of American Sign Language (ASL); audism towards students, parents, educators and the greater community; and a lack of overall transparency and community engagement. These behaviors have led to a slow and steady decline of students attending ISD, including a mass exodus of deaf parents pulling their children out of ISD and moving them to another state's deaf school.

The Illinois Association of the Deaf (IAD) is in large support of the ISD Governance bill Paula Chance and Jerry Covell have worked on extensively. This bill has the capacity to address many of the issues that remain at ISD and would allow ISD to retain more control to focus efficiently on students and education rather than unnecessary red tape bureaucracy that ISD is experiencing now. Paula Chance and Jerry Covell brought this potential legislation to Secretary Purvis' attention during the September 2015 ISD Advisory Council (ISDAC) meeting, and her initial support and recommendations were much appreciated.

Shortly after this ISDAC meeting, Secretary Purvis reached out to Jerry Covell, Paula Chance and me and requested our assistance with suppressing rumors that Governor Rauner intended to close ISD. However, it was the events that transpired during the following months that led me to believe there may actually have been some truths to these rumors.

After months of being dismissed by the Governor's Office, DHS/DRS and ISD, the IAD and ISD Alumni Association (ISDAA) collaboratively submitted a letter demanding a meeting and immediate action to be taken regarding the hire of the Superintendent position and plethora of issues at ISD.

Several weeks later on March 18th, Jerry Covell - ISDAA Legislative Liaison; Paula Chance - Jacksonville Community Center for the Deaf (JCCD) Legislative Liaison; Tom Chance - IAD President Emeritus; Susan Dramin-Weiss - ISDAA President; Deloris Summers - JCCD President; Kevin Ryan - IAD Vice President; and I met with representatives from the Governor's Office, DHS and ISD, including Secretaries James T. Dimas and Purvis, Director Kris Smith, Interim Superintendent Preston and Director Marianne Manko.

It was during this meeting Secretary Dimas shot down the ISD Governance bill and shared his desire to absolve the DHS the fiscal and managerial responsibility of ISD. Secretary Dimas also blamed the ISD climate and reputation on the Deaf community by stating that we created the issues that exist. He was not interested in working with us to resolve the problems or how to find qualified persons for ISD superintendent. Nonetheless, in good faith, we recommended amending the superintendent qualification language to expand the pool of qualified candidates. In response, Secretaries Dimas and Purvis shared they would take the lead in getting this addressed.

In the May 2016 letter announcing Director Miller's involvement with the ISD Superintendent search, Secretary Purvis also shared Representative C.D. Davidsmeyer would introduce the legislation to amend the superintendent qualification language to assist with expanding the pool of candidates. To date, no such amendment has been developed, filed or introduced by Representative Davidsmeyer or the Governor's office.

Additionally, after this meeting, Director Smith requested I meet with Marianne Manko, DHS Director of Communications, to discuss how the ISD website and marketing efforts could be improved and better target deaf and hard of hearing individuals. This meeting never happened as Director Manko sent me several emails, of which Director Smith was copied, sharing all dialogue regarding the website and marketing would be handled internally at the DHS. I followed up with Director Smith regarding the change in direction, but never received an email reply.

Instead of collaborating with or including the respective organizations advocating for improvements at ISD, the Governor's Office charged the IDHHC with supporting the superintendent search. In the IDHHC's June 2016 Communication Matters issue, the IDHHC claimed they would "reach out to various national organizations for assistance in disseminating the information of the superintendent position. This also includes the National Association of the Deaf Conference (NAD) and the National Deaf Education Conference (NDEC) to be held July 5-9th in Phoenix, Arizona." The IAD, ISDAA and JCCD were present at the NAD and NDEC Conference; meanwhile, representatives from the IDHHC were not present.

The Governor's Office also charged the IDHHC with conducting a "listening tour" at ISD to understand the collective vision of the ISD community. In the same June 2016 Communications Matter Issue, the IDHHC stated the tour would happen in the fall when students returned. To date, this tour has not commenced.

Director Miller's selections of committee members to conduct this tour quickly drew the ire of the Deaf community, including the IAD, as the committee had no deaf advocates. The selection of two deaf educators was not sufficient. As a result of pressure from the community, Director Miller added Susan

Dramin-Weiss to the committee, sharing her role as president of the Illinois School for the Deaf Alumni Association qualified her to serve on the committee. Director Miller also added a parent to the committee, but only after parents of ISD students who serve on the ISD Advisory Council raised concerns about the exclusion of parent representation.

The Governor's Office's decision in involving the IDHHC with the ISD Superintendent Search has been an absolute atrocity. The IDHHC is incompetent to begin with, has minimal knowledge of the needs regarding deaf education and has not satisfied numerous mandates established in law. In sum, the Deaf community had low expectations of the IDHHC and their displayed ineptitude proved us right again.

The Governor's Office has not done much better. They have done an atrocious job since the beginning of the search for the new superintendent at ISD. The purposes, intents and objectives of this steering committee have frequently changed, all of which has left the greater community and members of the search committee perplexed. The Governor's Office also appointed Dennis O'Brien, a non-state employee, as Director Miller's replacement on the steering committee while Director Miller was on medical leave; this selection was perplexing as Director Smith and Interim Superintendent Preston stressed at the September ISDAC meeting that any individual interviewing the Superintendent candidates must be an employee of the state and a Rutan certified interviewer.

Collectively, Secretary Purvis, Secretary Dimas, Director Smith, Superintendent Preston and Director Miller have been aware of the problems and issues that have happened and still are happening. They have not listened to us and have constantly rebuked our ideas, suggestions and solutions.

Secretary Purvis, Secretary Dimas, Director Smith, Superintendent Preston and Director Miller cannot expect the Deaf community to help them to clean up their mistakes and the messes they've created, especially as they continue to blame the problems and messes at ISD on the Deaf community. Each of them has breached the Deaf community's trust, often at the expense of our deaf children. Instead of working with us, they continue to exclude us instead of embracing us. Even when input is sought, there is a failure to follow through or a total disregard for the ideas of many. When communication occurs, it is too often delayed and incomplete.

For these reasons stated, this letter shall be interpreted as a vote of "no confidence" in the current leadership within the Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD), Governor Rauner's Office, Department of Human Services (DHS) and Illinois Deaf and Hard of Hearing Commission (IDHHC). The Deaf community will work with our legislators to ensure a full and complete reform is made at ISD. We are done being goaded and misled by the leaders from the aforementioned agencies. We are taking matters in our own hands; it's the only way things will truly improve at ISD.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Corey Axelrod".

Corey Axelrod
President
Illinois Association of the Deaf