

February 28, 2018

Dear Members of the TCAPS Board of Education:

It is with heavy hearts and deep regret that we, the members of the Traverse City Administrators Association, submit this letter to inform you that on February 27, 2018, our group has had to take the unprecedented action of a vote of no confidence in the leadership of Superintendent Paul Soma. Regardless, we will continue to serve our students, staff, parents and community with the highest level of integrity.

Based on Board Attorney and Superintendent communications and processes to date, we do not feel that we have been offered a fair, unbiased and safe hearing of our concerns. Thus, we are sharing this information regarding our claims directly with you. We have sought to have these issues heard by all Board Members for the past 161 days without success.

TCAA members are your dedicated building Principals and Assistant Principals, representing all seventeen schools across the district. We are no one's enemy. As the people responsible for the front line, day-to-day management of your district—in your buildings—we are critical members of your leadership team. Along with teachers, we are the first point of contact with our children, their parents, and the community. We are the ones who implement your policies and strive to achieve your adopted goals. We do our best to ensure that each student has a high quality teacher and is provided the highest quality education possible in the most supportive setting. We make countless decisions every day toward that end. We all truly want to do the best possible job for our students and community. Again, no matter what picture Superintendent Soma may try to paint, we are partners with you.

Operating an incredible district like TCAPS requires that the highest levels of leadership take care of its people first—students, parents, staff, and building administrators. Foundational to this care are relationships that build trust without doubt, initiative without intimidation, and innovation without fear of failure or retribution. This is what we expect from the Superintendent because we expect the same of ourselves, our staffs, and our students. In accordance with behaviors that are consistent with Marzano District Leadership under Cooperation and Collaboration (Domain 4), District Climate (Domain 5), and the MI-Excel Blueprint outer ring, district leaders:

- **demonstrate and value healthy, constructive and professional relationships**
- **inspire practices that best support and grow our children and all of those who work on their behalf every day**
- **emphasize a high standard for respectful communication to all stakeholders**
- **are grounded in collegiality and professionalism**
- **trust first, then earn trust through open, honest feedback and genuine dialogue**

A strong public school system is vital to our Traverse City community. Our students need and deserve an educational leader who respects others, builds trust, and demonstrates care at all times. We are passionate about our staff and students; we desire a leader who inspires us to achieve more, holds us accountable to high standards, and works with us to serve our community.

Unfortunately, we do not have that at TCAPS. The unhealthy leadership behavior outlined below demonstrates a lack of authentic educational leadership. Mr. Soma's leadership creates division which results in a fear-based culture. We bring these concerns to your attention because this behavior is interfering with the highest quality education every one of our students deserves.

We have organized our concerns and supporting examples into five categories:

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Bullying and Intimidation, Particularly of Female Principals

Mr. Soma frequently relies on bullying behavior and intimidation to establish control and remind people of his authority. This behavior is most often directed at female Principals. Recent examples include:

- Mr. Soma tells multiple Principals that they are disloyal to him and TCAPS whenever they question reasons for a decision or provide him with feedback.
- According to Board legal counsel, Raymond Davis, an unusually high number of investigations - twelve - have been initiated against Principals concerning different matters since October 2017. Each investigation occurred with different processes. None were consistent or explained to Principals. Feedback was sporadic and not always given. Many began without notice to the Principals that they were even being investigated. This is perceived as an intimidation tactic.
- Mr. Soma yells loudly at a female Principal regarding his position of authority and her subordination to him. Mr. Soma forces the Principal to repeatedly tell him what his title is--“Superintendent!”
- Mr. Soma repeatedly tells female Principal, “Aren’t you happy I gave you this job?” and states “I gave you this job.” Mr. Soma continues to remind Principal that she is “in charge” of her building only because of him.
- A female Principal continues to receive feedback that Mr. Soma is disappointed in her and that he feels she is “disloyal.” The Principal approaches her direct supervisor for advice regarding her relationship with Mr. Soma. He tells her to smile more, be more friendly, and to never question Mr. Soma. She asks him directly, “Do you think he treats me like this because I am a woman?” The direct supervisor responds, “I do not know you as well as I thought if you can even ask that.” The direct supervisor ignores the concern raised by the question. Relationship with Mr. Soma and the Principal continues to be characterized as a struggle. Principal tries a second time to get help from her direct supervisor regarding the poor relationship and Mr. Soma’s aggressive behavior towards her and she is told, “You need to learn how to take fucking feedback.”
- Mr. Soma endorses a 3-year contract agreement with the TCAA, but one female Principal is offered only a 1 year contract with little explanation as to why. That female Principal had no disciplinary action or investigated conduct and didn’t have a negative evaluation rating. There was no explanation or due process as to why she should receive a lesser offer than other Principals.
- A female Principal suggests (in a district improvement meeting) that we should use opportunities like the opening admin retreat/“family meeting” to talk about student achievement data along with operational data (enrollment, square miles, operating budget, bonds, mileage). Principal’s direct supervisor calls the Principal later that night and questions the intent of the statement, stating that Mr. Soma was very upset and felt attacked by the comments. Mr. Soma also questioned the loyalty of the Principal.

Lack of Emotional Maturity and Lack of Emotional Control

There have been multiple instances where Mr. Soma has demonstrated a lack of emotional control, both with staff and with the public. These have been embarrassing to the district and destructive to professional relationships with staff and community.

- Mr. Soma frequently jumps to character attacks against individuals who disagree with his point of view or try to have normal discourse about an issue (as evidenced by Old Mission and Interlochen community members, TBAISD staff, Kingsley staff, community business people, City Commission, School Board and Principals).
- Mr. Soma is noticeably absent from the second day of a Summer MI-Excel training in Lansing with TCAA Principals focused on “partnerships with Central Office.” One of those Principals, as a representative of TCAA, schedules a meeting the next week with Mr. Soma and the Associate Superintendent to share Principal’s concerns and perceptions regarding the Lansing conference, and to offer constructive ideas to help Mr. Soma keep the group united moving forward. The meeting turns hostile when Mr. Soma raises his voice and starts yelling angrily about Principals. The Principal attempts to turn the meeting back to a solutions-focused outcome and is unsuccessful. The meeting ends uncomfortably and Mr. Soma is visibly agitated.
- A hand-selected group of district staff (including Principals) were asked to participate in ‘anonymous’ 360 surveys about Mr. Soma and other Executive Team members in the Summer of 2017. In a subsequent mixed-company district meeting, Mr. Soma went on a lengthy diatribe about the survey results and expressed anger at the 360 feedback received. Mr. Soma insinuated that the feedback was an inaccurate assessment of his performance. Some of the 360 feedback for areas of improvement for Mr. Soma included statements such as, "Too emotional, easily swayed with opinions rather than facts, elevates quickly," "Emotions sometimes interfere with decision making and interactions," "His hot-headed responses, at times, can be difficult not to take personally." Principals now know that they cannot give him honest feedback, and worry that they will be retaliated against for contributing to “anonymous” surveys.
- Mr. Soma and Associate Superintendent communicate to Principals that Principals have “broken their trust” and “betrayed them” and that “relationships do not matter” after the final Special Counsel Investigation report is provided to the Board. The message that Mr. Soma and his team will not work on the development of healthy professional relationships with Principals is stated and repeated at district meetings.

Unprofessional Behavior

Several observed behaviors of the Superintendent both before and after September 2017 can be categorized as unprofessional, or conduct unbecoming of a community's educational leader. These unprofessional behaviors have impacted our perception of fairness of this investigative process.

- Mr. Soma often speaks critically of TCAPS Board Members outside of their presence to TCAA members, other Board members, and community members. In front of a meeting of district administrators, Mr. Soma states he “controls all but one member of the school board” and on other occasions was openly critical of Board of Education members. Mr. Soma publicly has complained to a group of community leaders and to local school superintendents and executives about three TCAPS Board members that had “gone rogue” on him.
- Mr. Soma informs a Principal that a teacher at their site should not have “liked” a school board member’s social media post because Mr. Soma does not agree with the board member’s view point. The Principal is directed to address the staff person regarding their personal opinions posted on social media outside of work time.
- There is a drastic change in tone and frequency of emails, phone calls, and text messages from Mr. Soma to Principals from September 2017 through December 2017. Principals’ questions and concerns impacting their buildings and students are either not responded to in a timely manner or at all.
- During the TCAA-requested investigation, Mr. Soma conducts his defense efforts during work hours (without using vacation time) and often uses his public @tcaps.net e-mail to communicate with his personal attorney and co-defendants. Mr. Soma also uses his TCAPS executive assistant to communicate with his personal attorney and facilitate meetings for his defense. In contrast, Principals are directed verbally and in writing by the administration that they cannot work on investigative business or their defense during work hours. Principals honor this directive.
- Mr. Soma’s FOIA requests for TCAA-shared documents are fulfilled the same day, without fees, by staff that he supervises. This stands in stark contrast to the fees and timing that TCAA receives for their subsequent FOIA requests as they are charged unprecedented fees (**over \$2,100.00 for one request and \$3,600.00 for a second**) and the maximum time to fulfill a request is exceeded.
- Since August 15th, 2017, Mr. Soma has formally addressed the Principals only once - during an administrative team meeting on February 21, 2018 - and did not acknowledge the Principals’ concerns or the tense district climate. Even after Mr. Soma publicly claimed to be ‘cleared’ by Special Counsel Revore’s report, he has not acknowledged that these events have even happened or stated his point of view and reasoning for his leadership decisions during this unprecedented crisis. Mr. Soma has consistently addressed the media and the Board regarding the TCAA concerns, but has never talked with TCAA about them or how we can work together to resolve these concerns.
- After reading the January job description for the Interim School Improvement Director, the TCAA sends a letter to Mr. Soma noting that Principals are willing to pick up that extra work and save the district money. Mr. Soma declines the offer within 24 hours. Nearly two months later, the person hired for the Interim School Improvement Director position resigns before working a single day on the job, but Principals hear about it from the resigning staff member; Mr. Soma has not addressed it.
- Mr. Soma obtains a personal attorney that has close ties both to TCAPS’ Board attorney and the Special Counsel hired by TCAPS to investigate him. These three attorneys - Mr. Davis, Mr. Revore, and Mr. Delaporte - worked cases together and were employed at the same firm just months before Mr. Soma/TCAPS hired them for the TCAA investigation. Mr. Soma does not draw attention to this relationship and the negative perception it could create. This bias is evident in the substantial imbalance of time spent with Mr. Soma and his co-defendants versus time spent with TCAA during the Special Counsel Investigation.

- Mr. Soma continues to engage with both Board members and Board lawyer, Mr. Davis, about Principals during the TCAA-requested investigation. He uses his influence, his unfettered access, and his emotional disposition with the intent to create bias among members of the Board of Education. This bias has been evidenced in several instances, including a December text from President Falconer to another Board Member: “Davis is very much empathetic to our situation. We all see what is going on, but we will keep responding professionally and appropriately, and the truth will be revealed.” The bias is also apparent in Trustee Klegman’s public statement in a February Board meeting. In contrast, the TCAA has been denied direct access to the board, therefore TCAA concerns could not be directly expressed or addressed.

Disseminating Inaccurate Information

During the TCAA investigative process, Superintendent Soma has knowingly disseminated inaccurate or incomplete information to board members, the media, and staff. In contrast, the TCAA has avoided arguing our concerns in the media.

- Mr. Soma consistently skews how information is presented in his Board updates and meetings to show praise towards employees he believes support him and to avoid attributing positive accomplishments to the actual Principals who did the work. This includes informing the Board that Chris Parker brought in a National Math coach for teachers and Principals, when in truth the coach was recruited and coordinated by a Principal, to address items related to assessment, instruction and coaching of both teachers and Principals.
- Mr. Soma uses local media to publicly name-call a TCAA member a ‘liar’ and to spread incorrect/incomplete information regarding an investigation that was ongoing. The Special Counsel Report acknowledges the concern (pg 48) and refers the matter to the Board. This runs contrary to Mr. Soma’s often repeated mantra to “Complain Up, Celebrate Out”.
- Mr. Soma states that Mr. Parker was out of the district during a critical investigation of Principals (excusing Parker’s absence to the Board). However, Mr. Parker’s vacation days do not align with this and Mr. Parker had a meeting with Mr. Soma in district during that time period.
- Mr. Soma provides the local media with quotes that cancelling meetings is normal and ‘happens all the time’ - when he has been part of over 20 meetings involving Principals that were cancelled within a 2 month period - an unprecedented number. Mr. Soma portrays himself as unaware of many of the cancellations, although he is electronically notified of most of the cancellations at the very least. When the meeting cancellations are questioned by TCAA leadership, Mr. Soma again contends he didn’t know about cancelled meetings and stated, “talk to Parker”.
- Mr. Soma interjects frequently during the TCAA-requested investigation to influence the Board; such as when he e-mails Board members to let them know TCAA hasn't filed a grievance yet so he can't proceed with mediation. Mr. Soma cites his frustration that TCAA is slowing down the process while he wants to move forward.
- Mr. Soma's update to the Board includes praise for Mrs. McCall rectifying two special education issues that required compensatory ed due to "serious errors that were made at the building level." No principals were ever informed of any errors of due process, or disciplined regarding these situations; some even felt they had been validated for handling these sensitive issues effectively.
- Board Member Kelly Clark asks Board President Erik Falconer if/why the district Administrative Intern Program had been canceled. Only after that does Mr. Soma then notify the Board that they have canceled the Administrative Intern Program, specifically citing, "This is a direct result of the ongoing investigation and the impact it has had on schedules and other operational functions of the district." The letter sent to teaching staff in the program had cited 'unforeseen circumstances' (not the same language used with the Board). Principals are never informed of the Administrative Intern Program cancellation. After informing the Board, Mr. Soma states in an email to Mrs. McCall, "KC called EF to ask why it was canceled. Don't know how he found out about it."
- During the TCAA-requested Investigation, Mr. Soma alleges he received a police report about July vandalism at WSH that the Principal withheld information. After meeting with Mr. Soma, Trustee Klegman encourages each Board member (via email and text) to meet with Mr. Soma and read the police report because “actions taken by [the Principal] are relevant to the investigation.” Most Board members refuse to view the report because it would create bias during the investigation; they acknowledge Mr. Soma has access to Board members that the TCAA does not. District emails (which can be made available) show that the Principal fully looped in multiple Executive Team members about the vandalism and what he knew about it, including Mr. Soma, who logged email responses and OJ Simpson jokes about the situation. The Principal was never given a copy of the police report with the perpetrator’s statement.

Undermining School Leaders

Many instances have occurred where Mr. Soma, or the Executive Team at his direction, have undermined building Principals with their staff. This has resulted in a further erosion of trust between Superintendent Soma, Executive Team members, and building administrators.

- Mr. Soma's team discusses and sends directives to staff on routine site level issues, such as room assignments, entry procedures, game management, routine communications to parents, etc., thus undermining Principals' ability to communicate in a timely manner with the staff and parents.
- Mr. Soma frequently mentions the ongoing investigations of Principals in his Board updates. These investigations are viewed as attempting to undermine confidence in the building leadership.
- When a Principal reports concerns from a staff member to that person's district supervisor (as they believed they are required to do) the Principal is directed to write an apology to a district administrator.
- A female Principal is directed to write an apology to teaching staff with respect to how their union representatives perceived her tone. The TCEA president praises Mr. Soma and Mr. Parker for this in an email to the Board.
- Directing a Principal NOT to be in their building the first business day after Mr. Soma called Principal a liar in the newspaper. The district doesn't refute the subsequent media reports that purport the Principal's absence was due to suspension.
- Multiple female Principals are told they cannot have contact with certain members of their staff. Mr. Soma allows or directs his Associate Superintendents to meet with and survey teaching staff without the Principals' knowledge. Rather than problem-solve with building leaders, Mr. Soma invites staff to review the Principals' decision-making and performance, and does not allow the female Principals to be a part of the conversation or have due process.
- As Principals request decisions on district-level issues related to curriculum, school improvement, legislative mandates, evaluation and meeting times, they receive no response at all or no response for weeks. Often responses are sent by Mr. Soma's team directly to staff without looping the Principals in. Mr. Soma's approach of cutting Principals out of the communication forced Principals to make independent decisions inconsistent with the (uncommunicated) district decisions.

In summary, members of the Traverse City Administrators Association (TCAA) have lost confidence in the leadership and effectiveness of Superintendent Soma. Principals feel unsupported in leading their schools and are forced to spend precious time and energy constantly strategizing how to do what is best for their staff and students without upsetting Superintendent Soma. While Mr. Soma talks of focusing on students, collaboration, and trust, his words are not congruent with his actions. Regardless, we will continue to serve our students, staff, parents and community with the highest level of integrity.

Therefore, as stated above, on February 27, 2018, the TCAA membership approved a vote of no confidence in Superintendent Mr. Soma by a secret ballot tally as follows: 26 yes, 2 no, 3 abstained.

The TCAA appreciates the difficult role of Board Members in addressing this most serious matter. For the betterment of our great district, the TCAA respectfully requests a meeting with the Board to discuss these concerns.