

COMMENTS MADE BY PERI SMILOW

*at the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education meeting
Monday, July 20, 2015*

My name is Peri Smilow and I am the parent of a rising 7th grade student at South Orange Middle School. I am here tonight to address the sudden departure of our principal Mr. Ugliodoro.

As a professional educator I have had many hours of conflict resolution and anti-bullying training. I have been a mandated reporter. One of the bedrock understandings of the anti-bullying and conflict resolution movements is that to be a silent witness or bystander to bullying is akin to being a bully oneself. I am no longer willing to be a silent bystander to what I believe has been a vile smear campaign against Mr. Ugliodoro, which has resulted in his decision to leave our district.

Many were surprised to learn on July 1st that Mr. Ugliodoro, the talented and committed principal of South Orange Middle School had tendered his resignation. I was not. I was aware that twice in the past eighteen months Mr. U was the victim of libelous public allegations which thorough investigations revealed to be unfounded. These false accusations took Mr. U away from his important work as principal, distracted the faculty and staff in his building from continuing their critical work with our children and cost the tax payers money.

The worst part of this story is the lack of accountability or punishment for those who make slanderous public accusations of this kind in our community. Nor has anyone yet articulated the painful possibility that in reviewing the public record, it appears that these accusations may have been encouraged by an individual or individuals from the SOMS staff. I believe that we have lost an extraordinary educator and administrator as a result of a concerted effort to oust him. The bad guys won.

I understand the importance of providing a public forum for sharing information with our Board of Education Trustees. But when such sharing is allowed to turn into a witch hunt we all have an obligation to respond loudly that we will not allow such public bullying of our public

servants. By not responding we run the risk of finding ourselves in a community in which any teacher, administrator or community member could find him or herself the victim of similar public shaming.

As an observer of the workings of this Board – I feel obliged to articulate my own deep disappointment at the way in which the level discourse of some of the members of this Board has deteriorated and some of you have chosen to use scare tactics and shaming language both among yourselves and with members of the public. In this type of environment shaming and bullying tactics thrive.

While I recognize the democratic imperative to allow people to say whatever they like during Public Speaks, Board members themselves should NOT be free to make pejorative comments about specific district personnel in public. To do so is to violate your sworn obligation and your legally mandated adherence to the state code of ethics.

My appearance here tonight is an appeal to you, our Board and to the administrators and faculty in our schools and to our general public. We have lost a very special and talented educator not for any reason other than our inability to stop the bullies. This summer we welcome a new Superintendent of Schools and at least two new principals. There is much we can agree to disagree about. But let us air those disagreements in the light of day – with honest information shared and with respect for those in our community who have dedicated their lives to serving our children.

Thank you.