Why I Voted To Abstain…

I have been asked by my constituents why my vote was to abstain for the next South Orange/Maplewood Superintendent.

It was not only the matter that I didn’t get enough information. It was the way the final vetting process was handled; plus, the community itself did not get enough information during the process.

The process was consciously done in a non transparent and incomplete manner. This time the BOE should have known how critical it was to do this selection right. The Board of Education has for several years not chosen permanent Superintendents who were good for the district. They decided again this time, to implement another flawed search procedure to choose the next permanent Superintendent.

In my opinion, the Board did not allow enough time for the Board to make a site visit to the new Superintendent’s district. This would have given us the opportunity to ask additional questions based on what we may have observed during a visit.

Further, the parents and residents of Maplewood and South Orange did not have an opportunity to observe or weigh in on the Superintendent or any candidates as other residents were able to do in other districts Superintendents searches, such as Teaneck, Montclair, and Newark. (See first three links below) Even the current Superintendent the BOE voted on, Dr. Taylor, participated in public forums in two Superintendent searches. (See last two links below.) However, the BOE did not even afford this option and respect to the residents of our two towns.

Our BOE stopped making site visits, to vet new permanent Superintendents. The Superintendents chosen this way, coincides exactly when our school district began losing its Blue Ribbon designation, and the beginning of the very high budget increases our school district budgets incurred.

Teaneck - <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/bergen/teaneck/2018/04/13/teaneck-superintendent-candidates-answer-questions-public-forum/506128002/>

Montclair - <https://baristanet.com/2018/02/goldberg-johnson-kasun-will-montclairs-new-schools-superintendent/>

Newark - <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/newark/2018/05/08/newark-superintendent-finalists-will-face-the-public-on-may-18/>

Kansas City - <https://youtu.be/DdkqFikJiXg>

Harford - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKBthRi-eeg>

Why did the Board have to rush this selection, when we had options to do the selection in a more transparent, measured and inclusive manner? That choice was based on their judgement.

The school district and community are too important for me to make a rushed decision when there is time to make more measured decisions. Therefore, I utilized the option afforded to me under governance standards - I abstained.

One of the challenges that we have had on our Board now for years, has been this issue of transparency, and communication. The way we conduct ourselves ends up many, many times causing us great harm. And until we understand that, and act with courage accordingly, we are not going to have the school district that our children deserve.

Let me be clear, my vote to abstain, was NOT a reflection on Dr. Taylor’s ability to lead this district. The process prevented me from getting the complete information to complete my standard of due diligence.

As a Board member of the South Orange/Maplewood School District, and Vice Chair, of the Essex County College Board of Trustees, I am keenly aware of my responsibilities as a Board member. My vote was a result of certain conversations, certain promises, and understandings, and agreements within this search process that were not, in my view, fulfilled.

Johanna Wright

This letter is my opinion and not that of the South Orange/Maplewood Board of Education.