

January 21, 2023

There are numerous problems with the County Commission's ill-considered decision to send a letter to the State Board of Education. First, the assertion that the Jefferson County Board of Education violated our own Bylaw 1.12 is just wrong. That Bylaw provides that a policy change can only be made at the first regular meeting following a proposal to change the policy. That is exactly what happened. The proposal to change the policy on semester exams was made at the November 28<sup>th</sup> Board meeting, and the vote to make the change happened at our next regular meeting on December 12<sup>th</sup>. To be certain of the correctness of our actions, we double-checked with counsel, who agreed that what we did was not only within our bylaws, but also 100% in accordance with all laws, rules, regulations, and past practices.

The County Commission asks for an investigation as to what is in the "best educational interest of parents and students of Jefferson County." Whether a semester exam should equal 3% or 10% or 14% of a student's final semester grade is a debatable question. Indeed, we put out for public comment a proposal to have a county-wide semester exam policy. The majority of respondents – 56% -- did not believe there should be any semester exams at all, while 38% wanted the semester exam to be given 10% or less value. Only 6% of public commenters wanted the full 14% value. These commenters included parents, students, and teachers. To be sure, some teachers at the high school level wanted semester exams to be worth 14%, but it is important to understand that some wanted no semester exams at all. What we as a Board did was look at all the input and information that we had at the time and used our best judgment.

It's important to understand that since the pandemic started during the spring semester of 2020, there have been no semester exams. This semester was to be the first time since then that students would be taking comprehensive exams. That means that three-quarters of high school students had never taken one. As duly elected officials, we used our judgment as to what made sense for the very first time that 75% of our student body would be taking an exam. We determined that 3% was a reasonable number for the first go around to give test taking experience without penalizing students and to establish a committee that included teachers to take a more detailed look into what this policy should be going forward.

Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with that decision. And that's OK. That's what happens when grown-ups make decisions that affect lots of people. But based on the statistics, I believe that our decision to go with the 3% number was a reasonable decision for the first semester exams in 3 years. Specifically, if we had gone with the 10% weight for semester exams, then 10% of students would have dropped a letter grade, while only 1% would have improved. I hope the committee that we voted to establish will be able to delve deeply into this issue and provide us insight for when we reconsider the issue.

There is also an allegation that members of the BOE "harassed, intimidated, and/or pressured" its own employees regarding their opposition to the semester exam policy change. Not a single specific instance of such harassment has been raised, and I have asked and have not been able to learn of a single accusation to validate this allegation. It is beyond irresponsible to attempt to meddle in the affairs of a separate governmental entity without one iota of evidence, aside from "well, I heard it happened."

From a personal standpoint, the County Commission made an accusation that the semester exam policy decision was made with personal financial interests in mind. I have a child at Washington High School, and so that portion of the letter was almost certainly directed straight at me. Ostensibly, these people believe that I made the decision on the weight of semester exams based on the potential for my child to be able to qualify for the Promise Scholarship, which is a state-wide program to award scholarships for going to certain in-state schools. That accusation is patently ridiculous. I do not want to delve too deeply into this subject in the event that it becomes subject to a legal dispute at some point in the future, but it is almost certain that my child will not be using the Promise Scholarship, whether she qualifies or not. I have had three children graduate from Washington High School. All have qualified for the Promise Scholarship, with and without the existence of semester exams, but none of them attended in-state schools. I do not know where my child will go to college, but I do know her college search is focused outside of West Virginia.

There are other issues with the County Commission's vote. For instance, their letter is not going to help with attracting good businesses to Jefferson County. I sit on the Jefferson County Development Authority, as the BOE representative; one purpose of the JCDA is to attract new businesses. There has already been at least one potential new employer who saw the media reports about this issue and called the JCDA because these reports triggered them to have second thoughts about locating here.

Frankly, the County Commission needs to stay in its lane. The voters of Jefferson County elected the members of the Board of Education to handle educational matters, while the voters elected the County Commission to run County government.

To be sure, as President of Board of Education, I welcome input and debate about the best policies to implement. In West Virginia, and particularly here, where we border the richest county in the U.S., it is very difficult to attract and retain teachers. The pay for a trip over the mountain can be worth \$30,000 more a year. Given that there is a nationwide teacher shortage, we have an uphill battle. Political stunts like this one by the County Commission make teacher and staff recruitment that much more difficult.

As a final note, we of course invite the State Board to check out Jefferson County Schools at any time. Quite frankly, I am proud of our system and welcome state education officials to see how we operate.

Kathy Skinner