A Letter from the RSU 21 School Board

November 23rd, 2021

The RSU 21 School Board issues this letter in light of the public announcement that a recall effort is targeting at least two RSU 21 School Board members, Board Chair Art LeBlanc and Communications Committee Chair Tim Stentiford. This recall based on the claim of a lack of support for teachers is unfounded as the 3-year teacher’s contract signed in June 2021, completed well before the contract even expired, had over 90% approval from the Kennebunk, Arundel, Kennebunkport Education Association (KAKEA).

Robin Gratiot Vaughan, President of the Educational Technicians Association, states, "These past two years have been rough on all of us, but meeting with you and your board members these past few months have lessened our anxiety and fear that we are not being heard. You have let us know that our concerns are important to you, and you lead this Board of Directors toward a positive outcome... no matter how far apart we may be. Your leadership and resolution skills are a breath of fresh air. You care, you listen, you process information given to you critically before making a comment and/or making suggestions on how you see the situation. I know that when we come to you during negotiations that you hear us."

The pandemic has created significant challenges for RSU 21 employees regarding their health and safety. In addition, we have a teaching staff with many reaching the years of service where they qualify for retirement. Mr. LeBlanc states, “In the 16 months since August of 2020 when Dr. Cooper and this Board started working together, we have accepted 18 teacher resignations and 7 retirements. One of those resignations was for a hired teacher who never started in the district, 3 others resigned and returned as part time instructors or substitute teachers bringing the total down to 14 resignations during the 16-month period. RSU 21 currently has no vacant teaching positions. Pre-pandemic data in the State of Maine shows average yearly turnover for teachers ranges between 7% to 12% while we have experienced a 5.8% turnover during the 16 months of the Covid 19 Pandemic, an excellent retention rate in any environment.”
Mr. LeBlanc states, “The Board's goals are to provide a high quality public education, to be leaders in our state and nation academically, and to ensure that our staff receive competitive salaries and benefits. We are proud of the concrete and undeniable steps that the district has taken in the past two years to support our employees during the pandemic, to move our salary scales in a meaningful manner, and provide for the health and safety of our students and employees. Members of the Board are aware that there is a well-organized group that meet regularly and seem focused on discrediting the work of the Board and the administration for political gain. Despite the efforts of this group to cast doubt on the Board's commitment to our motives, the Board will remain steadfast in its commitment to support our students and employees.”

Taking the leadership helm of RSU 21 in August 2020, in the face of the unprecedented challenges during a global pandemic, Dr. Cooper kept the schools open all last year with a hybrid approach that combined both in-person and remote learning. At the start of the 2021/2022 school year, with COVID-19 cases soaring to record numbers in
Maine, Cooper led the return to school full time and was among the first to implement pooled testing and host vaccination clinics for our elementary students to reduce quarantines for students and keep them in school.

Mr. Stentiford joined the board in 2019 and has served as Chair of the Human Resources Committee, co-leader of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Ad Hoc Committee, and currently the Chair of Communications Committee. Stentiford was also elected unanimously as RSU 21’s delegate to the state assembly this year and worked with Maine School Management Association on the resolutions committee for the conference. Stentiford has been recognized by Maine School Management Association (MSMA) and his work has been adapted for use by MSMA in their work with many school districts, including the Bangor School Committee.

Mr. LeBlanc joined the board in July 2020 and was voted in as Board Chair his first meeting 8:4. This past July Mr. LeBlanc was voted in as Board Chair unanimously. Mr. LeBlanc has also served with Mr. Stentiford on the KAKEA, TEA, and the RSU 21 Educational Technician Association negotiations teams. Mr. LeBlanc is currently working in Facilities and Finance to fund and start construction of the Kennebunk High School Athletic Complex in June of this coming year.

In efforts to support employees during the pandemic, the Board met with association leadership, listened to their concerns, and worked collaboratively to put in place Memorandums of Agreement (MOA) providing additional paid COVID-19 sick leave, support for stipends, and other important health and safety protections. Last week a successor MOA was executed with the Transportation Employees Association addressing specific needs for transportation employees and a successor MOA is in negotiations with the Educational Technicians Association. Float nursing staff has been hired to provide additional capacity during the pandemic while pooled testing is supported by two more additional nurses.

Director Dawn Therrien served as the lead negotiator of the Negotiations Team and, for the first time, the Superintendent attended nearly every negotiation session, a
departure from past practice in the district in which prior Superintendents did not join these important discussions. Having Dr. Cooper attend those negotiation meetings provided her the opportunity to hear directly from union leaders and take action to fix areas of concern. The 3-year KAKEA contract corrected salary scale inequities, introduced a Master’s +30 track, and added two instructional days to the calendar with approval by over 90% of KAKEA membership and with unanimous approval by the RSU 21 School Board. The parties jointly agreed to add these days to ensure our students were getting the education they deserve. We came together with the teachers for our kids. The Board negotiation team also collaborated with the Transportation Employees Association (TEA) to achieve a 3-year contract that enhanced salary scales, including starting pay for entry level bus drivers, and supported course and training reimbursement. That contract was approved with unanimous votes by both TEA and the Board.

Ms. Therrien states, “The informed work of the negotiations team would not have been possible without the extraordinary efforts of Mr. Tim Stentiford and Mr. Art LeBlanc who brought forth competitive analysis tools and relevant market data so that we could make informed decisions. This important data allowed us to expand opportunities for RSU 21 instructional personnel and support their career growth with competitive salaries. To say that Mr. Stentiford does not support RSU 21 instructional personnel is simply not true. I have worked side-by-side with Art and Tim. They are honest, trustworthy, and reliable. I’ve seen how much they care about the employees of this district and how hard each one of these men have worked over the course of this past year to ensure RSU 21’s success. I stand with them.”

Scott Pipher, President, and Dennis Duprey, Vice President of the TEA comment, “School boards around the state are besieged with criticism from parents and other members of the community concerning their efforts to provide educational services while remaining cognizant of health and safety. This is no easy task and it is made more challenging by ongoing public expressions of disapproval. These school board members are our friends and neighbors that we elected to oversee the education of
our children. The comment that Art Leblanc and Tim Stentiford do not support teachers and staff is divisive and in our opinion: simply not true.”

Pipher and Duprey added, “During our recent contract negotiation, we found Art and Tim to be extremely supportive of the transportation department. Our needs and issues were dealt with fairly and respectfully. They were truly interested in us as individuals, learning about each of our jobs in the department. The negotiations were based upon employee retention, balanced with student safety and the RSU 21 budget. Art, in his role as Board Chair, recently asked us to give a presentation about being a bus driver. This indicated that he considered our jobs important and our contribution to the RSU 21 team appreciated.

Pipher and Duprey concluded, “Mr. Archer may disagree with decisions made by the Board, but that doesn't give the right to be discourteous. Ranting about recalling two hard working board members doesn't solve problems: it just creates bigger ones. Let's not forget about kindness and respect.”

Ira Camp, Finance Committee Chair responds, “While I was not on the negotiating team for the teacher's contracts, I was kept up to date with its progress on a regular basis. The amount of time and energy Mr. Stentiford and Mr. LeBlanc put forth in obtaining real data and numbers in our market for salary and benefits in order to support our teachers and community was astounding. The work was extremely well done and greatly benefitted our district at that time and for future negotiations as well. As Chair of the Finance Committee, I have seen real positive changes in other areas as well that Art has spearheaded, such as legal expenditures and our capital reserves account. The accomplishments of both of these board members are many and the time and effort put forth by both should be complemented and rewarded, not admonished. To recall Art Leblanc or Tim Stentiford from the school board would be a giant mistake and a real step backwards for our board, the students, and RSU 21 as a district. I strongly believe that both Art and Tim are sincerely well intended and only have what is best for the district in mind.”
Camp added, “It is already hard to find volunteers to serve on the school board and treating us like this is not going to help recruit people in the future. My seat will be up at the end of June 2022 and I will not be running again so those who wish to have an impact and make a difference should consider running.”

The RSU 21 School Board and Dr. Cooper support all employees within RSU 21 and will continue to address specific needs created by operations within the COVID-19 pandemic. We fully support Dr. Cooper, Mr. LeBlanc, and Mr. Stentiford and will maintain our focus on providing excellence in education for all students from our three communities.

Sincerely,

RSU 21 School Board

Art LeBlanc, Board Chair
Loreta McDonnell, Vice Chair
Ken Levesque
Amanda Downing
Ira Camp

Dawn Therrien
Peter Sentner
Tim Stentiford
Louis Braxton Jr.
Megan Michaud