



## EMID strategic plan fallout

1 message

Eric Celeste <efc@clst.org>

Tue, Aug 30, 2011 at 12:32 AM

To: John Brodrick <john.brodrick@spps.org>

Cc: loriswanson5379@comcast.net, cristina.gillette@isd197.org, hoeppnerg@stillwater.k12.mn.us, mforsb@district16.org, jgelbmann@comcast.net, kitty.gogins@isd623.org, prokopop@invergrove.k12.mn.us, kmorehead@forestlake.k12.mn.us, john.m.vujovich@usps.gov, jerry.robicheau@mnsu.edu

John, thanks for the conversation yesterday afternoon about the EMID strategic plan fallout from last week's meeting. As I said in the call, though I could not be at the meeting, the parents that were able to make it shared their impressions with some of us involved in the EMID Families group. I also spoke with Interim Superintendent Robicheau this afternoon and I remain quite concerned about the process the board is using to move forward. You asked me to write down some of my questions from our call so you could follow up on them in more detail.

### WHAT IS THE RUSH?

My core concern is with the rushed nature of this process. Virtually the whole strategic planning process was undertaken without any permanent leadership of EMID in place. Since Dr. Cassellius left EMID there has been only the most sporadic communication from the EMID District Office to parents. Only a very few parents have the luxury of attending board meetings, and outside of the board forum the only interaction with our interim leadership was at a community meeting in May that was not even held at one of EMID schools. Here are the notes in the Crosswinds Site Council minutes of June 6 regarding that May meeting:

Community meeting at Washington. No imminent shutdown of schools, at least five or six years to go. Noted the strategic planning effort. Call for parents to contact Governor and share their feelings about EMID. Continuing our superintendent search will await final legislative news. A lot of parents shared some really good stories and advocacy.

My conversations with both you and Dr. Robicheau made it clear that you left that meeting thinking a commitment had been made only to the following school year, yet somehow parents left that meeting feeling that a more substantial commitment had been made. We took heart in that show of confidence in our schools.

In fact we can look even earlier: at the October 2010 meeting of the EMID board parents were assured that the strategic planning process would not even conclude in time to affect EMID's commitment to 10th grade through 2012/13. As you probably recall, the issue at the time was whether EMID would be allowed to offer grades 11 and 12; still, the timeline described is relevant to this week's concerns. The board was discussing an amendment regarding the strategic planning process offered by Mr. Gelbmann of South Washington County: "It is further recommended that the strategic planning process provide a long term plan and, if financially feasible, 10th grade will continue to be offered through the 2012/13 school year." Here are my notes to EMID Families after that meeting:

It was noted by some [board members] that such an amendment was not really necessary. They argued that since the strategic planning process will not conclude until the Spring of 2012, there would be no way to make changes to the grade structure until at the earliest Fall 2012. Mr. Gelbmann pointed out that this still left current 8th grade families uncertain of whether they would be able to attend 10th grade at Crosswinds in 2012/13.

(Note that I have to refer to my own notes because there are no official minutes of the October 2010 EMID board meeting available on the EMID website. In fact, the minutes of many board meetings are missing from the website, another sign of the poor communications from the district office during this interim.)

Somewhere between October 2010 and July 2011 the strategic planning process sped up, coming to a conclusion more than seven months earlier than anticipated. What is the hurry? What entity or entities are putting pressure on EMID to so drastically reform its operations so precipitously?

### WHY HAVE PARENTS NOT BEEN CONSULTED AND KEPT APPRISED OF DEVELOPMENTS?

Aside from a few early interviews with parents, no other public input has been sought in the planning process. In fact, to date even the conclusions of the planning consultants have not been shared in any tangibly recorded way.

The EMID board apparently discussed the strategic plan at the July board retreat. As you know, no parents were present to observe that meeting. As of today, more than a month later, no minutes or notes from that meeting are available at the EMID website. There is no reasonable way for the public to have any idea what transpired at that July retreat.

What I learned from both you and Dr. Robicheau yesterday is that in July the District Management Council (DMC, consultants for EMID), presented a PowerPoint slideshow to the EMID board that laid out the findings of the strategic planning process. Dr. Robicheau yesterday told me that there is no report from DMC and none is expected. This slideshow constitutes the full extent of the output of the strategic planning process. Though the slideshow was presented to the board in July and has been available to the administration since then, it, too, has not yet been posted on the EMID website.

Not only has there been barely any consultation with the public about this process, there are no plans to seek anything beyond "open forum" input at board meetings for the next two months! Dr. Robicheau said that the only public hearings currently anticipated would follow the vote of the EMID board in October to recommend closure of the schools. Only once that is the official recommendation of the board would public input be concertedly sought.

As you well know, EMID is a year-round school. We were in session in July when the board held its retreat, yet no invitation was ever made by the administration for parents to attend what turned out to be the ONLY presentation of findings from the strategic planning process that was or is currently planned. Parents are not hard to find during the school year. At any point the administration could have sent notes home with students inviting our participation or informing us that the strategic planning process was concluding sooner than originally thought. At any time EMID "parent link" automated calls could have been made inviting review and input. I myself have sat in front of the board and shared with you the email address ([families@emidfamilies.org](mailto:families@emidfamilies.org)) and website (<http://www.emidfamilies.org>) of our informal EMID Families parent organization. Staff in the district office know who we are and how to reach us, having worked with us on many joint efforts in the past. Why did nobody reach out for greater public participation in this process in July? Why did we get blindsided by finding out for the very first time at the August 2011 board meeting that the board was considering shutting down our schools entirely, and that the shutdown might happen as soon as the end of the 2011/12 school year?

#### WHY IS THE EMID BOARD TAKING THIS ACTION BEFORE THE MDE TASK FORCE ON REPURPOSING INTEGRATION FUNDING REPORTS ITS FINDINGS?

As you know, EMID Families coordinated parent participation in lobbying at the capitol this year. I know I saw you at some of those hearings when testimony was being accepted regarding the education bills in the Minnesota legislature. Students and parents both rose to defend the funding that is the lifeblood of EMID, and we succeeded in making integration funding one of the very few issues that saw some compromise between the bitterly divided legislative majority and our Governor. Rather than immediately eliminating integration funds, this compromise requires the education commissioner to submit a task force report to the legislature by 15 February 2012, recommending how best to allocate funds previously allocated as integration revenue funds in order to achieve improved educational outcomes for students. Meanwhile those funds stay in place as they are through FY2012.

Dr. Robicheau told me yesterday that the speed with which this process is moving is an effort to be "proactive" and stay ahead of the changes that will be introduced by this task force and the subsequent legislative debate. Does Superintendent Silva have a similar desire to beat the legislature to the punch? Are the superintendents afraid of some consequence of this task force and trying to preempt it?

What makes the EMID board so certain that it has the right answers? Why not wait just one more year to take full advantage of the MDE task force findings and the insights of the legislative debate focussed on integration funding? Isn't this a bit like biting the hand that feeds you? Our representatives and Governor compromised to give us a bit of breathing time to consider the future disposition of integration funds, but we insist on rushing ahead anyway?

#### SINCE WHEN HAVE THE EMID SCHOOLS BEEN PERCEIVED AS A PROBLEM FOR THE DISTRICT?

Dr. Robicheau also told me yesterday that EMID had to stop "dancing around Harambee and Crosswinds" and decide what kind of services would best fulfill the mission of the collaborative. I am aware of the tensions among some member districts arising from the mandatory nature of their participation in the collaborative. There seems to be a sense among some that EMID schools siphon off too much funding along with the transferring students.

In fact, this dynamic was clearly evident in the resistance to adding grades 11 and 12 to EMID schools last year. But even at the darkest moments of those debates, I never had any inkling that the EMID board itself was considering shutting down the schools entirely. The worst parents heard was that there was some consideration being given to removing grades 9 and 10 from Crosswinds. That fear was what the earlier cited October board discussion addressed. When we heard the board insist that "all options would be on the table" in the strategic planning process we did not consider that that might include shutting the schools entirely.

Far from being obstacles, Harambee and Crosswinds have been the heart and soul of EMID since its founding. These schools are the laboratory that help EMID staff learn the lessons they then share with all the member districts through the Office of Equity and Integration. Without the schools, the training and insight the office provides to teachers and staff across all ten EMID member districts would be just hollow talk. We learn the core of our multicultural lessons and demonstrate the feasibility and indeed stunning success of our student-to-student relationships by running these real-world schools. How does the strategic plan replace this priceless resource that EMID teachers, staff, and family have built with sweat and tears for over a decade? What fountain of wisdom will the district expect EMID to draw on once our schools have been shuttered and our students scattered?

#### FOR WHOM DOES THE EMID BOARD WORK?

John, I consider you "my" representative on the EMID board because I am a Saint Paul parent who gets to vote for you every now and then. You are my elected official, and in some sense you work for me. I appreciate that work all the more after the past few years of observing just how constant and thankless the work of a school board member can be. I thank you for that service.

However, unlike the Saint Paul school board, all of whom are "my" board in some sense, the EMID board answers to a much more complex dynamic. Each board member has a relationship with their home board, and I assume you must from time to time consider the instructions or desires of other members of your home board when making decisions for EMID. Some questions, like peanut policy in Harambee, may not require much home-side consultation. Others, like changes to the EMID funding formula, probably require much more careful navigation on the home front. I am not at all sure where this decision to close EMID schools lives on this spectrum.

Dr. Robicheau told me yesterday that he believe the EMID board has direct authority to shut down EMID's schools. The recommendation the board makes in October will be a recommendation to itself. The vote taken in November to decide whether or not to close the schools will be a vote that does not require additional authority from the home boards. While this is likely technically correct, I doubt that you are approaching this as a decision you can make sitting at the table at Harambee. Indeed, in yesterday's conversation with me you referred to a call you would like to make to Superintendent Silva to clarify her views on some of the issues we discussed.

When you are sitting at the EMID board table, who are you working for? I must say that I've lost some of my faith that the EMID board is working for the parents and students of EMID schools. Certainly EMID has an impact on the lives of all students in all our member districts, but I believe we have a special obligation to those parents and students who placed their faith and their children's development directly into the hands of our staff.

If you believe that these parents took the decision to place their children outside of home district schools lightly, then you have been missing the magic of the EMID experience and the source of EMID's lessons for our member districts. We came to EMID because it could teach our students to love their neighbors as themselves. We came to EMID because it provided an environment that teaches our children to value every colleague, no matter how different from themselves. We came to EMID because it brought our kids into contact with children from a wide range of neighborhoods and backgrounds without corralling them into homogeneous cliques. We came for the year-round schedule, the amazing grounds, the excellent teaching, and the oh-so-rare arts programming. We trusted you to be stewards of this experience and to use it as a model for Saint Paul, just as your colleagues on the board could use it as a model for their districts. EMID has never been competition for home district schools, rather it is a fragile bubble where staff are given a chance to work a little differently from the way their colleagues work in home districts. You are about to pop that bubble, and I fear that you may not understand how precious and rare a gift you hold in your palm.

I was encouraged by our discussion. I hope you see your role as, at least in part, shepherding the remarkable gifts that Harambee and Crosswinds have given all member districts, for they are the spring from which the Office of Equity and Integration draws sustenance. I believe you see yourself working for our kids, not just my son at Crosswinds, and not just EMID Families, but all Saint Paul families who benefit from an option like EMID and from the lessons it puts before all our staff across all our districts.

I am not asking you to conclude that EMID is best served by continuing to manage two schools in addition to the Office of Equity and Integration. But I am asking you to consider: What is the rush? Why are parents and the public not being more fully included in the planning? Why is the board considering this action before the MDE task force reports out? Why are the schools being considered a problem instead of being recognized as the source of EMID's strength? And finally, for whom are you really making this decision? Let us take a bit of time, allow the schools at least to reach at least through the 2012/13 school year and into a new legislative biennium and all it may bring. Allow families time to make their case.

I am counting on you!

...Eric

Eric Celeste / [efc@clst.org](mailto:efc@clst.org) / <http://eric.clst.org> / [651-323-2009](tel:651-323-2009)

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