

# Formerly Censored Article, “Supervisors Make Allegations Against Superintendent John Keenan” Is Approved For Publication

An article appeared in the *Fling* on April 1 discussing administrative censorship under District Policy 2432 of a prior version of the following article. Pursuant to the District Policy, Principal Joseph Occhino’s denial was appealed to the Board of Education (BOE) and Superintendent John Keenan on March 29. Keenan recused himself from participating in the appeals process. A meeting between the author, her counsel, two members of the BOE, and counsel to the BOE was held on April 29. The *Fling* has been pursuing additional reporting since June 2013 and has been working with school administrators along with the BOE to resolve any issues with the article. This revised version of the article was approved for publication on June 9th.

## Adelina Colaku’14

Nine tenured administrators and supervisors are in an ongoing dispute with Superintendent John Keenan, a conflict which the Board of Education (BOE) has yet to resolve.

This conflict was made public at the June 10th, 2013 BOE meeting when Supervisor Bruce Emra made allegations concerning the behavior of Superintendent John Keenan. At the following BOE meeting, on June 24th, 2013 Supervisor Robert Petrosino reinforced Emra’s allegations.

According to Technology Administrator Michael Rightmire, after Emra and Petrosino’s public allegations, on July 2nd, Principal Joseph Occhino was approached by Susan Keenan, the wife of John Keenan, and given a letter with an attached document in the parking lot.

Rightmire explained that this letter stated that if the group of nine administrators and tenured supervisors did not withdraw their statements about Keenan and apologize to him, the document attached to the letter, which was said to contain information that could potentially tarnish the reputations of some of the members of the group, would then be sent for publication to a local newspaper.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Keenan declined to comment on this matter. Several other teachers speaking on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter confirmed the existence of the letter handed by Mrs. Keenan to Occhino.

The *Fling* has not been able to obtain a copy of the letter or attached document. An Open Public Records Act (OPRA) request was filed on April 10th, in order to obtain a copy of the letter. Business administrator James Davis denied the OPRA request on April 15th. The stated reasons for the denial include that the letter contains, “personnel or pension records” along with “information generated by or on behalf of public employers or public employees in connection with any grievance filed by or against an employee”.

At the June 10th BOE meeting, Emra stated that on February 15th, 2013, a total of nine administrators and tenured supervisors filed a grievance with the BOE against Keenan. This group consists of Vice Principal Michael Koth, Principal Joseph Occhino, Director of Athletics and Activities Robert Williams, Director of Technology Michael Rightmire, Supervi-

sors Thomas Buono, Bruce Emra, Robert Petrosino, Steven Simonetti, and Gary Trotter. The grievance they filed include charges of Keenan violating BOE policy number 3351, healthy work environment, and number 3362, harassment policy of teaching staff members.

Emra said at the BOE meeting, “It took a month for the Board of Education to respond to our February 15th grievance. The Board said that it wasn’t denying that John Keenan had violated Board policies, and said it wasn’t denying the grievances. This was about as feeble a defense of an employee, in this case a superintendent of a major school district, as I could ever imagine.”

According to Emra’s statement at the June 10th meeting, the same group of nine administrators and supervisors wrote a letter to the BOE on April 8th, 2013, though the BOE did not respond. On May 31st, more than a month later, this group wrote the BOE another letter.

“One sentence [in the letter sent to the BOE] said that our reporting to the Board of Education, quote, told stories involving humiliation, degradation, ethnic slurs, violence, threats of violence, cruelty, deceit, manipulation, and a chronic betrayal of the school’s ethical principles, end quote. I’m here to remind the Board of Education that the same themes with different incidents were told to the Board of Education five years ago, a full year before John Keenan was promoted from principal of the school to superintendent,” Emra said.

Shortly after Emra’s comment, Northern Highlands Education Association (NHEA) Vice President Brennan Heffernan responded, “In light of the comments made about Mr. Emra, I just wanted to say that I believe, and I believe I speak for the NHEA when I say that it is essential that we as a school community recognize the voices of experienced educators. Mr. Emra has served this school district since the 1960s, much longer than many of the educators in this building have been alive. As such, I ask that the voices of educators, particularly experienced educators, be considered of reflecting vast experience in education and in particular in our school community. And those voices should be not just heard, but considered very carefully.”

Following Emra’s statements, Petrosino spoke at the June 24th meeting, and claimed that the follow up article that appeared in

the *Town Journal* on June 20th, 2013, contained a quote from Keenan that he read with “disbelief.”

Keenan said in the *Town Journal* article, “I have always conducted myself in a positive and profes-

**“He [Keenan] has harassed me, he has engaged in ugly and confrontational behaviors that have no place in acceptable social interactions among either adults or adolescents...”**

*Supervisor  
Robert Petrosino*

sional manner and I believe I represent Northern Highlands extremely well.” Petrosino claimed that this statement was false, alleging Keenan had violated numerous policies.

“He [Keenan] has harassed me, he has engaged in ugly and confrontational behaviors that have no place in acceptable social interactions among either adults or adolescents. I have shared the following three experiences with the Board attorney, the Board president, Mr. Occhino and Mr. Keenan. In January of 2012, Mr. Keenan interrupted my period 5, freshman world history class. He mocked my voice, shoved me in front of 26 students,” Petrosino said.

At this time BOE attorney James Plosia interjected and informed Petrosino that if he continued, he may be placing other people’s rights at issue, including his own. Petrosino continued with a final statement. “I will say that there is a toxic environment in this school. I will say that it has gone on for a long time. I will say that it has a negative impact on this institution. And I will say that I am quite disappointed in this venue that I have served in for nine years, and supervised six departments, that I’ve been warned to be silent,” Petrosino said.

According to the anonymous sources referenced to above, Mrs. Keenan delivered her letter to Occhino several days after Petrosino spoke.

All nine tenured administrators and supervisors declined to comment on the record.

Keenan said, “I am focused on fairness... I am relentless in my pursuit of

making this a better school, though some people don’t share that same effort but I don’t question their motives or goals. People have different ways of doing what they think is right, or good for our students.” Moreover, he continued, “I work to resolve issues, and that means compromise, trying, openness and approachability. But it doesn’t mean compromising expectations. People have to be held to a certain standard.”

BOE president Barbara Garand did not comment on the allegations concerning Keenan.

In 2008, in preparation for the superintendent search that resulted in Keenan’s promotion to Superintendent, the BOE and the NHEA conducted two separate climate surveys. The BOE surveys were administered by an external third party, the Center for Social and Emotional Education (CSEE). Bill Cobb, the former NHEA president, claimed that the BOE did not include open-ended responses because they did not want to read any negative remarks about their leadership at the time. As a result, Cobb gathered anonymous narrative survey responses and delivered them to the BOE.

“The climate survey was going to be done by the Board of Education, but theirs was going to be one of those things where you just check a couple of boxes and there’s no response. And I suspected that the reason that that happened was because they [the BOE] didn’t want to get any of these responses in the survey,” Cobb said.

Superintendent at the time, Robert McGuire said, “Having confidence in its own survey, the board disregarded Mr. Cobb’s survey... The board’s survey was conducted in a scientific manner. Mr. Cobb’s survey was mailed to his house by respondents. Which provides for greater anonymity? Only the board survey attempted to address all members of the Highlands community.”

Garand also claimed that the BOE survey was more valid, considering the complete anonymity and high response rate. “They [the CSEE] developed the questions which were normed and have been tested over time to test their validity. It was administered electronically and anonymously, something that is extremely important. Additionally, an important piece in looking at the validity of any survey is to see the response rate - we had 78% of the staff respond to the survey and over 89 % of the students, which

was wonderful. It was not a simplistic survey where people were asked to fill in a few bubbles as Mr. Cobb represented,” Garand said.

The results of the BOE climate survey, according to Garand, indicated lower than hoped areas of community and collaboration, with the parents rating it higher than personnel.

According to Cobb, the BOE refused to consider the written portion, out of a concern that the responses had been fabricated. “I was accused of having written every one of these [responses]... that’s not true,” Cobb said.

Garand said, “To my knowledge, no one on the Board ever accused Mr. Cobb of writing every response, but the point needs to be made that there were no controls. In fact, those that filled out a survey just returned the hand-written survey to Mr. Cobb’s home address.”

However, according to Cobb, NHEA survey results were scientifically analyzed by Dr. Frank Smith, of Saint Johns University

Department of Education in order to diminish bias. Dr. Smith reviewed the responses and completed a qualitative and numerical analysis, which displayed the concerns teachers had about leadership, in light of the pending Superintendent search, according to Cobb.

“There were 50 responses [to the NHEA survey]. To me, it is interesting that none of these 50 were ‘positive’ regarding Keenan... You would need to see to whom the BOE’s survey was sent. Did [the BOE] send it to ‘all members of the Highlands community?’ Because the questions I sent were, what helps you do your job most effectively at NH and what are the greatest challenges to doing your job effectively... These are the ones that were not in the BOE survey,” Cobb said.

The *Fling* was able to obtain a copy of the narrative responses Cobb gathered, and a majority of them showed overall dissatisfaction with the administration, particularly with the principal at the time, Keenan. ■

Keenan initially declined to comment on personnel matters due to confidentiality. On June 5, after the article had been submitted to the Board of Education for review, he emailed Adelina Colaku with the following quote. The *Fling* agreed to include his quote in a sidebar.



Superintendent John Keenan

“As a school official, I believe that confidentiality of personnel matters, protected by law, is very important. It is unfortunate that some have decided to comment on private, personnel matters and share opinions in public, and now in our student newspaper. As a school superintendent, I am bound to do what is right and just in accordance with law; however, I too have certain rights as an individual, and as an employee, and most certainly can defend myself against inflammatory rhetoric and false accusations, as necessary. I have 19 years of distinguished service to Northern Highlands and a reputation for high expectations and standards. Unfortunately, I am bound by personnel confidentiality law and, therefore, am not at liberty to discuss the details involving the employment of current (and/or former employees). It has been a privilege to serve the District as its chief education officer. As I move on from Northern Highlands, I will hold dear the memories I have of our great students and wonderful staff members, and cast aside the vitriol and ‘parting’ shots taken at me.”